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Reflections

Robert Silverberg

This is the opening paragraph of a science-fiction story that was published in 1928:

The Metal Man stands in a dark, dusty corner of the Tyburn College Museum. Just who is responsible for the figure being moved there, or why it was done, I do not know. To the casual eye it looks to be merely an ordinary life-size statue. The visitor who gives it a closer view marvels at the minute perfection of the detail of hair and skin; at the silent tragedy in the set, determined expression and poise; and at the remarkable greenish cast of the metal of which it is composed, but, most of all, at the peculiar mark upon the chest. It is a six-sided blot, of a deep crimson hue, with the surface oddly granular and strange wavering lines radiating from it — lines of a lighter shade of red.

And this is the beginning of a story published in 1947:

Underhill was walking home from the office, because his wife had the car, the afternoon he first met the new mechanicals. His feet were following his usual diagonal path across a weedy vacant block — his wife usually had the car — and his preoccupied mind was rejecting various impossible ways to meet his notes at the Two Rivers bank, when a new wall stopped him.

The wall wasn't any common brick or stone, but something sleek and bright and strange. Underhill stared up

at a long new building. He felt vaguely annoyed and surprised at this glittering obstruction — it certainly hadn't been here last week.

And a third story, which appeared in 1978, starts like this:

The office intercom grunted.

"Olaf?" It was Sakuma, head of Northcape Engineers. "Clients for you. A couple of motherworlders, pretty fresh to Medea. Want a research station built. I told 'em you could do it."

"Where?"

A silent second.

"Listen to 'em, anyhow," Sakuma said. "They're serious. Well funded. We've talked about the risks, and they're still determined. They want to see Farside —"

Much of the stylistic history of modern science fiction is encapsulated in these three excerpts. The first story ("The Metal Man," *Amazing Stories*, December 1928) starts in a clear, quiet way, undramatic but suggesting wonders to come: rather British in tone. The second ("With Folded Hands") exemplifies the slick, efficient style of the postwar *Astounding Science Fiction*, where it appeared in the July 1947 issue: strangeness dropped down in the commonplace world of bank loans and weedy lots. And the third ("Farside Station," written for Harlan Ellison's *Medea* anthology but first published in the November 1978 *Isaac Asimov's*

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Science Fiction Magazine), is very much up-to-date in manner, fast-paced and clipped.

Different as they are from one another, these lead paragraphs have two things in common. One is that they all get their stories moving quickly and encourage the reader to want to know what happens next. The other is that they all were written — over a fifty-year period — by Jack Williamson. Who is still at it today, a decade after his superb *Medea* story appeared, and whose sixtieth anniversary as a science-fiction writer we commemorate with this issue of *Amazing Stories*.

Sixty years of first-class science fiction?

Consider that a while. Calvin Coolidge was President of the United States when Williamson's first story was published. Isaac Asimov was not quite nine years old. Robert Sheckley and Philip K. Dick had just been born. Roger Zelazny, Harlan Ellison, Algis Budrys, and Robert Silverberg were all still some years in the future. Radio was new; television was science fiction; movies were silent. And Jack Williamson — born in Arizona (not yet a state of the Union) in 1908 — had just sold his first story.

Simply to plug away writing publishable fiction for sixty years would itself be an extraordinary record of persistence, even if the work were only mediocre. But when the Science Fiction Writers of America gave Jack Williamson its Grand Master trophy in 1975 — the second such award to be given, Robert A. Heinlein having received the first — he was not being honored merely for endurance. Over the decades Williamson has created an astonishing body of classic science fiction. What reader has ever forgotten the rollicking *The Legion of Space*, first published more than fifty years ago?

The powerful, brooding werewolf story, *Darker Than You Think*, of 1940? The chilling masterpiece of the robot takeover, "With Folded Hands," and its 1948 sequel, *The Humanoids*?

And so much more. The *Seetee* series, science fiction's first exploration of antimatter. The soaring, visionary *Starchild* books written in collaboration with Frederik Pohl. The great adventure story *Golden Blood*. And then, too, *The Reign of Wizardry*, *The Power of Blackness*, *Manseed*, *Lifeburst* — on and on and on. All of it written with vigor, power, constantly renewed inventiveness and insight. His writing has grown with the years. His work is always fresh, always new, always at the forefront of the field. No one could possibly have been able to tell that "Farside Station" in *Medea* was the work of a seventy-year-old writer. No one could possibly guess that the stories he will publish this year are the work of an eighty-year-old. In the late 1970s, at a time when most SF writers half his age were still clinging defiantly to their typewriters, Jack Williamson had already switched over to a word processor. He is the *youngest* sixty-year veteran anyone could imagine.

He doesn't look young, this tall, shy, gangling man who has spent his life under the Southwestern sun. You can see his years in the stoop of his shoulders, now, and in the folds and creases of his skin. But you need only spend ten minutes talking with Jack Williamson to feel the youthful openness of his restless, inquiring mind and the resilience of his indomitable spirit. And you need only read a few lines of any of his sixty years of science fiction and fantasy to know that you are in the presence of one of the world's great storytellers. He's a splendid writer and a warm, wonderful human being. It's been a privilege to know him and a

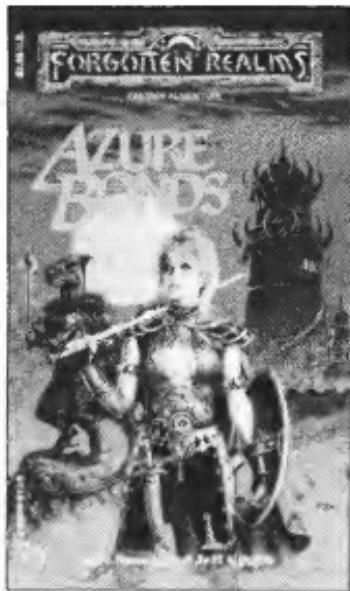
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delight to read him. He honors us by his presence in our midst. This Sixtieth Anniversary Jack Williamson *Amazing* is only a small token of acknowledgment for all that he has achieved.



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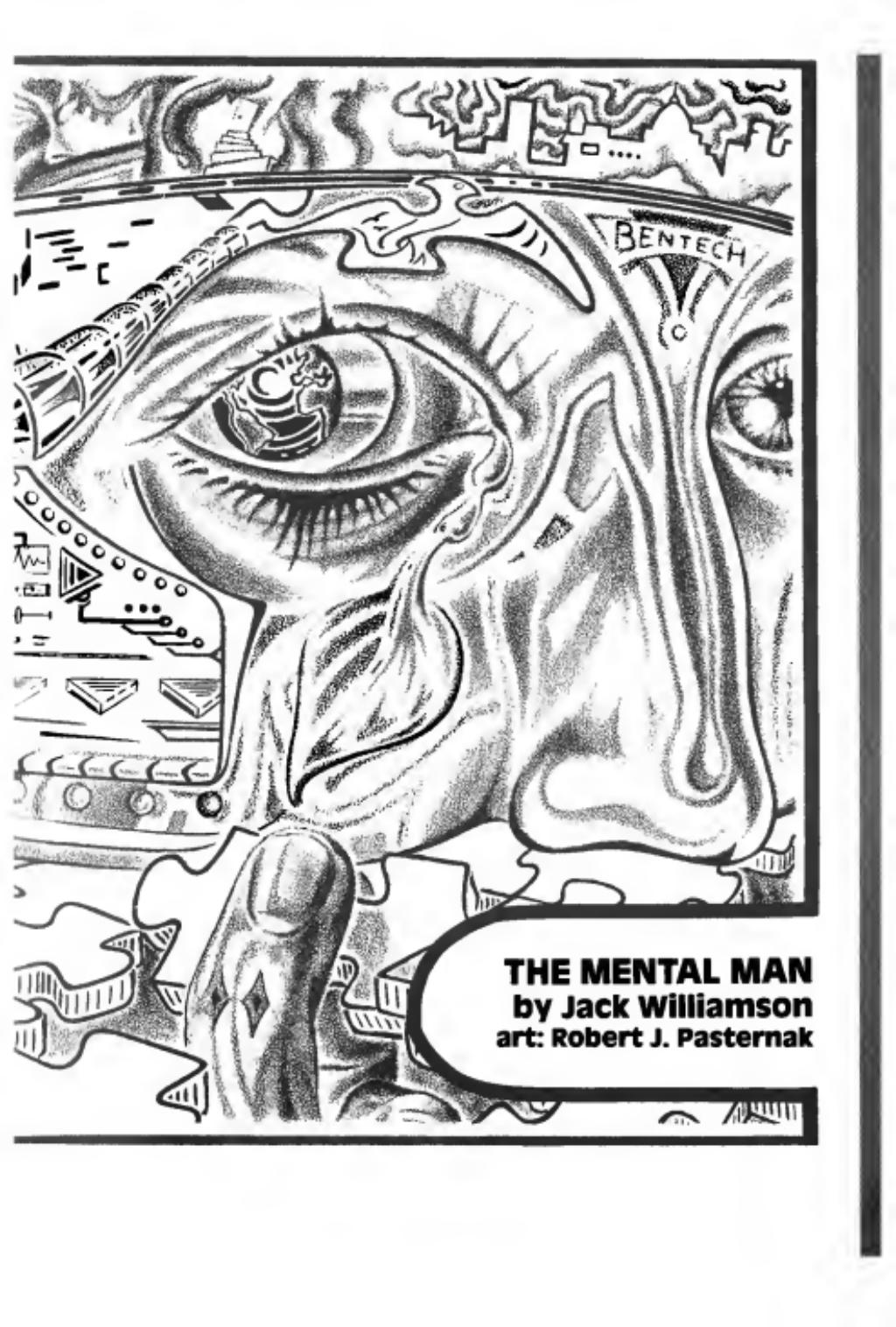
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BENTECH

THE MENTAL MAN
by Jack Williamson
art: Robert J. Pasternak

"Dad? Is the world about to end?" Little Amy had slipped out of bed to hear the late news, and he found her sobbing behind them in the hall. "Can you make us safe?"

"Kitten, don't you cry." He picked her up, shivering in his arms. "The newspeople — they keep trying to scare us, but the world will be okay."

He'd carried her back to her room and held her till he heard her sleeping. An hour later, Rhymer called him back to the project. Beth followed him out to the car.

"What is hap—?" She cut the question off because she knew he couldn't tell her anything. He felt her cold tears when she caught his face to kiss him. "God help us!" she whispered. "If there is a God."

That was three nights ago, or had it been four? A blur in his memory now, an ugly blur of strain and pain, but time didn't matter. What did matter were the silent bombs and the red rain, and Project BenTech, and the silicon chips aching in his head.

"Ben? Dr. Gale?" Duvic had come to shake him awake. "More bad news while you were napping. Orders now to test the interfacser. They want you ready."

He sat up on his cot in the dim-lit supply room and reached beneath the cot for his shoes. His shaven scalp itched under the bandages, and every move drove a cold steel needle into his skull. Teeth gritted against it, he wondered about Beth and the kids. Shut up here within these old brick walls that hid BenTech, groggy under Klebold's analgesics, he hadn't even been able to call.

Bad days and worse nights, no matter how many. Hours under Klebold's microsurgery. Days and nights of pain from the microchips, though Klebold said the brain had no sensors for it. Endless work with Duvic to finish the software meant to link his mind to the big computer. Practice simulations that always malfunctioned and had to be practiced and practiced again.

"Huh?" His mouth was dry and bitter from sleep. "When?"

"Now. They're waiting in the lab."

Shoes untied, he followed Duvic. His oldest, closest friend, yet maybe half to blame for this, if the bombs and the killing rain had somehow come from his research at Los Alamos.

"I loved my weaponeering," Duvic had once confessed. "Long ago, when I thought my country needed it. The thing I hit on terrified me. That's what brought me here. The hope that BenTech could somehow counter —"

With a sad little shrug, he'd stopped with that.

Gale shuffled after him now into the lab. The glare hurt his eyes, and he had to squint at the machine. It crouched in the middle of the long room like a steel-plated dinosaur. Duvic called it the interfacser. To Gale, it had always been the beast. Tonight it would devour him.

Three men stood frowning at it. General Janssen, long-faced and sallow-

skinned, chewing the end of his cold cigar. Klebold, taller than the general, with a bald bullet head that made him look more soldier than surgeon. Rhymer, the project engineer, jittery now and nervously chewing the fringe of his yellow moustache. They all stirred to meet Gale.

"Ben?" Critically, the general scanned him. "Are you okay?"

"More or less." His voice was a husky squeak. "Something new?"

"Nothing good." The general scowled as if to blame him. "Hell blazing everywhere. We're isolated now, but I did get orders before we got cut off. We strike at once."

"Strike?" He recoiled, and the silicon throbbed in his brain. "The wrong word, sir. BenTech is not a weapon. It can't kill. The most we can hope for is a new intelligence source. I've always told you that, and tried to tell the Pentagon. It's a research instrument, never yet tested."

"Why not?"

"We were never ready." Only half the reason. He hadn't wanted to risk the microchips burning out his own brain if things went wrong. Nor the power they might give any other brain, if things went right. "We aren't ready now —"

"Ready or not —" The general's voice had the brittle snap of thin ice breaking. "If nobody's told you, we're fighting Armageddon."

Amy's whisper echoed through his splitting head. *Dad? Is the world about to end?*

He turned to stare at Duvic. A slight, uneasy man with a thin dark face and opaque dark eyes. The black, sharp-pointed beard gave him the look of an undersized Satan. Repentant now, maybe too late.

"Ben, don't blame me!" Duvic caught his arm. "We don't know who hit us or what they've hit us with. It does look like the lethal agent I helped develop back there at Los Alamos. The secret maybe leaked to God knows who. We just don't know." A sad little shrug. "Nobody knows much of anything."

Gale's dry throat worked, but no words came.

"Washington —" Emotion had hushed the general's voice, and his hard face twisted. "Washington now. Knocked out this afternoon. We aren't hitting back because we can't identify a target. Dr. Duvic says you can."

All four men looked expectantly at him.

"I never promised anything —" He tried to shake his head, and the silicon exploded in his skull. "The experiment was planned to find out if computer power can enhance the power of the mind. What that might mean, we can't even guess."

"Damned double-talk!" Rhymer stepped closer, to peer into his face with reddened, swollen eyes. Rhymer was allergic. The tawny moustache was wetly dark beneath his nose, and bright droplets shone along its uneven edge. Snakelike, his pink tongue brushed them. "We're dying blind. We've got to know where to strike while we can. If you've been conning us —"

Duvic caught Rhymer's shoulder to pull him away.

"Margie —" The general's tight face twitched. "My wife — she was caught in Washington. Already dead, for all I can learn. We're all dead, Ben. Unless you can tell us what's gone wrong."

He shrugged, whispering, "May I call my family?"

"Impossible." One stern word, but the general's voice grew softer. "Sorry, Gale, but the phones — everything is dead."

Amy's breathless words echoed across his throbbing brain.

"Let's get moving." The general swung to Rhymer. "Project status now?"

"On the mark, sir. All-systems test running well. No bugs indicated. We should be up and ready in half an hour."

"Talk enough."

The general marched away.

Rhymer turned to the machine, testing switches and cable connections, squinting at oscilloscopes and gauges, checking items off a yellow sheet on his clipboard, his restless tongue darting and darting again against his damp moustache.

"Okay, Ben?" The surgeon leaned to frown into his eyes. "Let's get your pulse." Gale offered his wrist. "Good enough, considering, but I want you to relax while you can. Wash your face. Drink some coffee. Clear your head. You'll need a clear head."

Attentive as a nurse, Duvic went with Gale to the bathroom, stood by while he washed his face, pulled out a chair for him at the rickety table in the narrow alcove they called a lounge, swept back the clutter of used cups and half-eaten doughnuts and soiled newspapers to pour coffee for him. Gale's stomach roiled at the coffee. He'd had far too much of it these last bleak days, and not much else, but he gulped it down.

"If there is a God —" Refilling the plastic cup, Duvic stopped to mutter at him. "He's let us down."

"Don't blame God." Gale pushed the cup away. "Or yourself. Things just happen. That's my own philosophy — call it stochastic. I was never a believer, not in God or fate or even luck. Looking at the evidence, all I've ever seen is random chance."

Moving jerkily, like some small overwound machine, Duvic had poured sugar and dry creamer into another cup and brought it back to the table with no coffee in it.

"Your chance now, to get the truth." With a wry little shrug, Duvic peered into his dry cup and set it down. "I quit the weaponeering when I thought I'd found a link between nature and what we still call the supernatural. That's what I call the Delta Psi Effect. The reason why I'm here. I want to know."

"The Pentagon didn't fund us to look for God." Gale remembered not to shake his head. "The interfaicer's meant to be a military spy machine. No window into Heaven."

Duvic grunted and rose to put coffee in his cup.

"In all the universe —" Gale raised his rusty voice. "In all the universe, all I see is accident. Look at the project itself — a long chain of random chance. A car accident knocked me out of medical school. In the hospital, I happened to meet a nurse whose father was a doctor who happened to be researching the analogs between computers and the brain. I happened to marry the nurse, and her father set me on the research track that led to Ben-Tech.

"All blind chance —"

Duvic had come back with his cup too full. It spilled over. He set it on an unfolded newspaper, and the headlines caught Gale's eye. He leaned to read a block of bold black type.

DISASTER GROWS! WASHINGTON HIT!

Fragmentary bulletins from the nation's capital confirm earlier rumors from military sources hinting that the city has been "taken out." Interrupted calls described "silent bombs" exploding over Washington and adjacent metropolitan areas early yesterday afternoon, and spoke of "red rain" falling. Available officials have refused additional comment, but the total breakdown of all international and now interstate communications seems to corroborate previous reports of unprecedented world catastrophe.

His stomach burned.

Dad? Is the world about to end?

His mind saw them now, Beth and the kids, all three huddled together in helpless terror. Beth — in her wedding gown, as he liked to recall her from the photo in his wallet, gravely demure and still almost a child. Roger in his Little League cap, the freckled smile slowly fading into dazed bewilderment. Amy, begging him to make them safe.

"If there is a God," Duvic muttered again, "I guess we've let Him down."

Gale fumbled in his pocket for a broken roll of Tums and chewed two of them. Duvic hurried silently to bring water for him.

"Dr. Gale?" Rhymer was suddenly at the door. "Systems check completed, sir. We're up and ready now."

Klebold was waiting beside the interfacers, two nurses with him. They unwound the bandage from his head. He had to strip and lie face up on the cold metal bed. A ventilator fan blew icy air on his naked scalp, and he shivered in spite of himself.

"Nice trip, Doctor." Duvic bent over him, pretending confidence. "Keep your cool. We'll be debriefing you in a few more hours. Try to note and remember every perception, every sensation, every mental event —"

Klebold muttered something at the nurses, and they brushed Duvic away.

Lying still, Gale shut his eyes against the blaze overhead. His mouth felt parched, that stale coffee still bitter in his throat. Too late to ask for water. He felt the nurses spreading their web of snaky cables around him, smearing adhesive, sticking their cold telemetry to his naked flesh. Their swift fingers caressed his itchy scalp. The wires stung when they pulled, hooking the big computer to his brain.

He felt the bed moving. The Delta Psi Effect required radiation shielding, or Duvic thought it did, and the bed was sliding him under the shield. Into the maw of the never-fed beast. A dark narrow box, coffin-shaped, walled with thick lead.

"Okay?" Duvic's breathless voice. "Okay, Ben?"

He opened his eyes. They were all leaning intently over the creeping bed. Janssen, dark hawk-face set hard. Rhymers, pink tongue flicking like a snake's tongue across those glinting drops. The nurses, frowning down. One caught his eyes and tried to smile. Duvic lifted a jittery hand as if to wave farewell.

"Don't move!" Klebold commanded him. "We're calibrating."

Motion stopped. The beast had swallowed him. Something thumped. The heavy lead jaws thudded shut. Total darkness. Total silence till he heard the faint sigh of air from a fan. His scalp stung where the wires came out. The air was too cold. He shivered, and even that small movement woke pain in his skull.

He waited.

Nothing. Fading purple spots lingered in his vision where lights had glared. He felt a faint vibration of the whole machine, as if the beast had belched. That ceased. It was digesting him. Nothing else that he could feel, yet he knew what was going on.

Klebold would be metering a very careful voltage into the implants. Testing input and readout. Accessing microprocessors and silicon memory. Probing for synaptic responses. Carefully, gingerly, meshing computer software and softer living tissue, accelerating the slow chemical complexity of many billion live neurons to the light-speed of many million kilobytes of semiconductor microcircuitry.

Groping in the dark for any feel of the machine, for any sense of that vast computer power switched into his brain, Gale felt only the slow dead throb of the brick-heavy chips. His scalp prickled and burned, but he couldn't touch it. He was suddenly sweating, hot drops itching as they ran off his forehead, but the sensors were on him everywhere. He mustn't move at all.

He looked again for light, but even that visual purple was gone. The lead box was utterly dark. Coffin-shaped, dark and still as any grave. Listening in the utter quiet, he began to hear his pulse. *Rustle-thud, rustle-thud, rustle-thud.* Very faint, very slow. At least it said he was still alive.

Outside, the nurses would be at their post beside the machine, intent on their oscilloscopes, charting his vital signs. Rhymers roving everywhere,

watching them, watching the machine and the soundless computers around it, checking items off his clipboard, nervous tongue flicking.

The others would be gathered in their little plywood control cubby. Klebold punching and twisting at his half-circle of keyboards and monitors and meters, getting jittery as Rhymer now, worried about bugs in his software. Duvic and the general behind Klebold, the general silent and rigidly straight, gray-stubbled jaw clenched on the stump of that dead black cigar, Duvic hovering over him, whispering urgent words that he ignored.

Interfacing. Had it happened?

They knew no more than he did.

Gale's head throbbed again, keeping time to that slow *rustle-thud, rustle-thud*. Trying to escape it, he turned his mind to Beth and the kids. Three long days. Or was it four? Cruel days for Amy, if she thought the world was ending. What was happening to them?

He looked in his mind at the little white house he had bought when he moved them here, bought too high because launching the project had been pushing him too hard. Gone shabby now, the lawn neglected, the fine old elm diseased and dying. The woodwork needed paint. Beth had found another leak, this last one in the back bedroom closet. Wrapped up in the project, he had never been quite fair to Beth, dragging her a thousand miles from her parents and the sea she loved and her hospital job.

Too late to help that now.

Dawn just breaking, the town was still asleep. Her old station wagon was parked on the drive. Ninety thousand miles, and the right fender bent, but at least he'd been saving to replace it. Her birthday surprise —

A sudden scream of tires. A police car lurched around the corner and roared away, siren howling. Up and down the street, lights came on. Beth's window lit, Amy's, Roger's. The whole town was waking, half-dressed people running out of houses, staring up at lights flashing in the sky.

Bright points of hot blue fire, small and high. They made no sound that he could hear, but they left small red-glowing puffs that faded slowly back into the dark. The same silent bombs that took out Washington? Would red rain follow?

The front door opened. Beth darted out, still in pajamas and the red silk robe he gave her for Christmas. Arms loaded with coats and blankets, she ran to the station wagon. Roger stumbled after her, Little League cap and glove and bat hugged to his skinny chest. He stopped to gaze into the sky. Amy followed, whimpering and shaking her head. She wanted to wait for Dad to come home.

The town blacked out. Street lights and house lights gone. A moment of midnight, till the head lamps of cars began to come on. Beth screamed to wake Roger and dragged Amy into the car. The starter growled. The old Chevy shook and roared and plunged into the street, trailing bitter smoke. It vanished into chaos, running from Armageddon.

The lab had been dark for a moment, until emergency generators coughed and droned. Lights flickered on. Standing with the nurses, Duvic peered at the dead oscilloscopes and turned heavily to shrug at Rhymer and Klebold and the general, who huddled beside the dark machine.

"Dead." Duvic's restless hands spread and fell. "Brain-dead from the moment we energized the implants, so far as his life-signs ever showed. Heart stopped now." A sad grimace. "We fooled ourselves. All but Ben himself, if you remember. Always the skeptic. Always suspecting the Delta Psi Effect was only a chance statistical fluke."

Outside, in the gray half-dawn, the red rain was falling into panic and terror. Its fine hot drops seared the flesh they touched and knocked people down. On pavements, it hissed into a thick red mist. Those who breathed it gasped and died. The cars they drove veered and crashed.

The sun rose upon a low red fog and the hush of death.

Gale looked for the old station wagon and found its burned and crumpled metal still smoking in a ditch. He didn't need to probe inside it. *Dad? Can you make us safe?* Not from Armageddon. They were dead, and all the world. His own body, too, since the experiment began. So why was he alive?

With no will to move or think or feel, he found himself drifting away from the burnt-out car, away from the silent town and the dying continent and the whole sphere of Earth. The flow of time had changed. He watched the planet turn beneath the sun, the Americas lit for a moment and went dark again, Africa and Europe and Asia sliding after them into night. Red haze spread and thickened. The green of the temperate zones bled scarlet. Redness stained the blue of the sea. Wide white swirls of cloud grew slowly crimson, until he knew the planet was truly dead.

"Why?" He watched the red world spin. "Why can't I die?"

"Because you are eternal." The voice spoke from nowhere, not with words. He found a brightness shining near him, not with light. "Because your work has only now begun."

"Are you —" He hadn't come to search, but he remembered Duvic. "Are you God?"

"No more than you." He felt the brightness shining through him, thawing his desolation. "We are mind, evolved from matter as we ourselves in later time may evolve again into future beings closer than we are to God as you conceive Him."

He tried to grasp that. With no skull now, nor microchips implanted, he felt no pain. At last he gathered himself to ask, "What is this work that I must begin?"

"We foster new life, as we ourselves were fostered. Here you have known us at the edge of failure, hard-driven to meet the extinction of your planet. Through the final effort that you perceived as merely random chance, we have kept your mind alive. Now you have a debt to pay."

Feeling hope awakened, he asked how to pay that debt.

"You may know about the new supernova?" the brightness asked, and he remembered. "Its shockwave will soon be forming new stars in the molecular clouds around it. New planets will be born. Life can be kindled upon them, and mind for you to nurture. Guiding its evolution when you can, you may create wiser worlds than yours was."

Now at last Gale began to understand Duvic's tormented life and the Delta Psi Effect and the project's desperate history. The wounds he carried might never wholly heal, but the wounding world was gone. The new ones could be kinder. If Beth and Roger and little Amy were born again, he could make them truly safe.

Knowing that, he felt a kind of joy.



THE LITERARY CAREER OF JACK WILLIAMSON

Current Directions . . .

I grew up on a hardscrabble sandhill farm in Eastern New Mexico, taught mostly at home when I was taught at all. In 1925, I finished four years in a country high school with vague ambitions to be a writer or some sort of scientist, but no money for college or any better future in sight — not until the next year, when Hugo Gernsback launched *Amazing Stories*.

The lurid covers by Frank R. Paul and the stiff gray pages behind them opened grand new chances; they let me travel in space and travel in time to dazzling wonderlands I had never imagined, the worlds of "scientifiction" until Gernsback invented the term "science fiction" in 1929. They're an obsession I've never escaped, or even wanted to.

In the summer of 1928, twenty years old and still working on the farm, I mailed in a short story I called "The Metal Man." That fall, walking by a newsstand, I recognized my metal man on the cover of the December issue of *Amazing Stories*. I was a science-fiction writer!

Sixty years later, that's still what I am — and I like the label. Gernsback and other editors bought more stories, and I dropped out of college to write full-time. For a good many years, we were pretty well confined to low-paying pulp magazines. The world at large ignored or looked down on us. I didn't much mind; I was earning enough to keep on writing, which was what I wanted to do.

A social misfit, I had two years of analysis with Dr. Charles W. Tidd in the 1930s, a fine thing for me. I got to the Southwest Pacific as a weather forecaster in World War II. Back from the war, I married Blanche, a girl I had known since grade school; we had half a lifetime of good years together. In the 1950s I spent three years writing a comic strip, "beyond Mars," for the *New York Sunday News*. When that expired, I went back to college, collected three degrees, and became an English professor at Eastern New Mexico University, my hometown school, here in Portales. Among courses ranging

from freshman English to linguistics, I was allowed to teach science fiction, and I did my bit to get it accepted as a legitimate academic subject. Retired from full-time teaching, I was president of SFWA for two terms, 1977-1980.

And I've kept on writing, sometimes in collaboration with Fred Pohl, whom I vastly admire. With markets now open in book form and overseas, it pays better than it did, and it has gradually become a little more respectable.

Science itself has been an absorbing mystery story though these sixty years, chapter by chapter revealing the origins and nature and probable future of ourselves and our universe. Back when I began, Hubble had just announced that other galaxies exist outside our own; it was only in 1929 that he discovered the expansion of the universe.

Science fiction has expanded with it, diversifying into scores of types that fit different tastes and interests. Writing it has always been an exciting game, and I feel lucky that I could keep on playing. My best-known work is probably still *The Humanoids*, published in 1949, but there are recent novels I'm happy with, *Manseed*, *Lifeburst*, and *Firechild*. *Mazeway* is a new one, nearly done. I hope to follow it with *Lifecraft*.

I was delighted when *Amazing Stories* offered to celebrate the publication of that first story with a new one to run on its sixtieth anniversary. I began with a title, "The Mental Man," suggested by the promise that computers can actually amplify the power of the human mind. Two or three false starts died, but when I got the right idea, the story almost wrote itself.

... and Past Achievements

Novels:

- The Legion of Space*, 1947.
- Darker Than You Think*, 1948.
- The Humanoids*, 1949.
- The Cometeers*, 1950.
- One Against the Legion*, 1950.
- Seetee Ship*, 1950.
- Dragon's Island*, 1951.
- The Legion of Time*, 1952.
- Golden Blood*, 1964.
- The Reign of Wizardry*, 1965.
- Bright New Universe*, 1967.

The Moon Children, 1972.
The Power of Blackness, 1976.
Brother to Demons, Brother to Gods, 1979.
The Humanoid Touch, 1980.
Manseed, 1982.
The Queen of the Legion, 1983.
Lifeburst, 1984.
Firechild, 1986.

Nonfiction:

H. G. Wells: Critic of Progress, 1973.
Teaching Science Fiction, Education for Tomorrow (ed.), 1980.
Wonder's Child: My Life in Science Fiction, 1984.

Awards:

Grand Master Nebula, 1976.
Hugo, 1985.

JACK WILLIAMSON

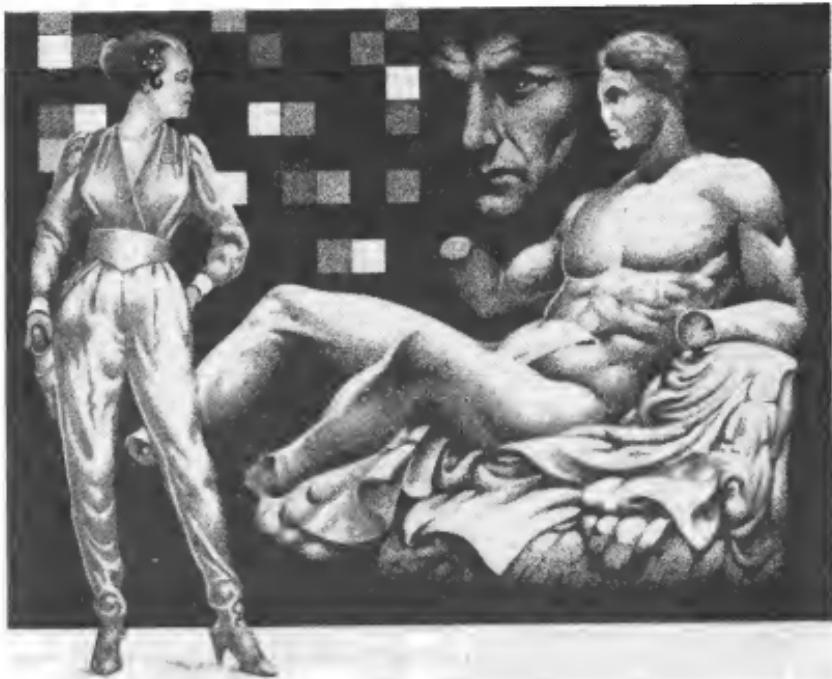
In shadow behind *Locus* flashes
Stood behind his eager fans,
Saw the ladies batting lashes,
Never dared to touch his hand.

A friend of mine in need of seating
Lingered in the panel room,
Dozed and woke to Jack's warm greeting,
Unimpressed by good fortune.

Had I known that simply sleeping
While the honored guest is speaking
Is the surest key to meeting
Famous men, firsthand.

— Marge Simon

Exhibition
by George Cuthridge
art: Stephen E. Fabian



George Cuthridge has had his short fiction published in Analog, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Galileo, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, and elsewhere. Solomon's Song, a mainstream novel written in collaboration with Janet Gluckman, is forthcoming from St. Martin's Press.

The author lives in a Yupik Eskimo village on an island in the Bering Sea, 36 miles from Siberia.

Gray light seeps between the gallery window's lavender curtains and spreads across the marble floor. It climbs my pedestal, covers my legs, fills the chiseled ridges of my belly. I try to savor the sun, but warmth cannot penetrate me in this joyless world. Chiaroscuro enwraps me as shadows slide across my surface — I hardly notice the effect. Another day has dawned; soon the gawkers and squallers and theorists and tourists will arrive. Let the crowds come; they don't bother me. I am stone.

I am Dionysus.

There are three other statues in the room, but even if we could communicate, I wonder if we would. Kritios Boy stands in the corner, his smooth adolescent body and quiet counterpoise balanced nonsymmetrically. Doryphorus, the spear carrier, is closest to me, anatomically precise and fluid, the embodiment of Classic grace. Poseidon, bronze and bearded, is nearest the barred door, his empty hand ready to hurl the trident still lost somewhere in the Adriatic Sea, his movements condensed into a contained pose that seems about to explode into action.

And me? Beloved of Ariadne, subject for Euripides and Michelangelo, I recline upon stone drapery. A study in reposed masculinity, my features look more liquid than carved, as if freed from marble rather than sculpted. Yet within this stone I rail and tremble, for though my body is Dionysus, my brain is from my mortal self, imprisoned and demeaned for my having demeaned Lorena.

I often wonder if the others feel sorrow for the crimes they committed. Kritios' hollow sockets, though, are too dark to impute anything except anguish. Doryphorus' eyes are blank, the world walled off. Poseidon faces the door, his back to me. We are warnings and scapegoats, my stone brothers and I, chosen by the whim of chance and computer analysis to serve as society's reminders and expiation: a handful of us lucky enough to be sealed inside statues, enstoned symbols of the crimes against humanity the Cadre promised could be eradicated if the People could just be prodded gently enough and often enough.

Thirty years ago I too had applauded when, on a platform of humanism and human rights, the Cadre won a plurality of seats in the squabbling North American Congress. In the name of freedom and equality they gave the People power and protection. They gave them hope and a voice.

They gave them easy answers.

They gave them museums, among other gifts.

My brothers depress me despite their beauty. Usually I look away, concentrate on the lavender rope-of-velvet that surrounds me until I sometimes think I can see the cloth's individual fibers. My vision locked, my mind drifts and I hear my stone's voiceless song, the incredibly careful chipping of the chisel and the grunts of the ancient workmen who positioned me in the Parthenon and padding of bare feet of Grecian women arriving for worship, come to give love and take alms in my name. But those times are gone,

as are my hands and feet and broken-off nose; something other than godhood now shares my marble. Within this sacred stone is also the brain of this modern mortal, my flesh flensed as testament of guilt.

Footsteps clack along the hallway beyond the door. A winch hums, the room's decorative portcullis lifts. Opening time. The door swings open, and Uta stands in the archway, left hand fisted against her hip and her right resting on the handle of her holstered sonic gun. She gazes into the room with an expression of cold caring, as though she owns this wing of the museum rather than being its guide-guard. Hair tucked in a tight bun and her features drawn and drab, her face is a chiseling of close-set eyes and aquiline nose and hard, narrow lips; her buff-white uniform, unadorned but for her nameplate, encases shoulders so narrow as to look pinched. No Olympic god nor Greek artisan could have fashioned such a stone! If only I could smile my sad scorn.

She checks dials near the door: time, temperature, humidity, delta-wave meters that detect vandalistic anger and theft-thoughts. After glancing at each of us, she strides down the hall. What art and what crimes await her around that corner? I feel empty despite my stone's solidity and the biochip computer — the system that regulates my protein and hormone supply, operates my ocular and aural implants and blood flow, and feels like a tiny, ceaseless itching on the left side of my brain. Whenever Uta leaves, I realize how much I need her visits. Masochism, in a Greek god! I hate her, yet when she's alone with us, jailer and jailed, I long for her humanness.

Once — many seasons ago — a daddy longlegs crossed my face. It is a benchmark to the longevity of spiders and the ephemerality of humankind that an arachnid dared invade this antiseptic museum. I yearned for his touch, as I yearn for air against skin, but of course I could not sense it. My mind seemed to press forward against the hollowed-out brain cavity. He passed over my ocular implant, and I rejoiced at the tiny silken hairs on the ends of those slender smooth stalks. His body was a brown globe that twitched as he walked.

Then Uta entered the room and saw the creature, though from the doorway he could only have been a speck upon my kept-cold stone; perhaps she has a detector dial for *insects, arachnids, and other vermin*. She frowned, hurried down the hall, and returned with a step stool. She leaned over me, her throat in front of my eyes, her nipples taut beneath the stretched cloth. Warm blood tided through my brain when she picked up the spider. Her fingers were long, bony, wrinkled, the nails broken or bitten to the nubs; beautiful, so beautiful they seemed! Did I feel those fingers, or was it just imagination? Was that the pulse within a palm against my stone? *Uta!*

She brushed web strands from between my shoulders and neck, and climbed down the stool. Then, holding the spider between forefinger and thumb, she watched me for a long time, eyes agleam. With pride? . . . appreciation? Had she feelings toward me, or at least about me? . . . or did she

merely respect her job, and the art? I wanted to ask, I wanted to plead; I was afraid to know.

As she walked away, she crushed the spider and put it in her pocket.

She's back, leading the morning's first group. Spectators, spiders: their gazes crawl across me, and my mind pools toward the back of my brain. It's some sort of girls' troop: gangly, giggly, acne-faced adolescents with merit badges sewn onto their shifts. Embroidered pictures of hammers, hover-cars, sonic guns grace the white cloth from shoulders to shins. Filthy feet poke from between the ropes of their clogs. The girls snigger and smirk. Uta scowls at them eyeing my genitals; the girls blush, look downcast, poke one another secretly.

"This prisoner is within Dionysus, the god of bread, wine, and revelry," Uta says, straightening herself and looking over her charges like a school-marm. "The statue has not persevered well over the ages. Some of its power, and thus some of its meaning for us, is lost because of its battered condition. Originally, the figure was in Greece, in the Parthenon's east pediment, witnessing the birth of Athena from the head of Zeus. As you can see . . ."

She rambles on about my persona and my crime, her monotone partially masked by professional inflection and by the smile that seems to say, *Learn this lesson well!* A couple of girls have their hands over their mouths, whispering. Their accomplices nod, bright-eyed. One chubby girl who looks older than the others stands apart, gazing up toward my pitted face, her eyes deep slits between her brown bangs and oily cheeks. Her mouth is pursed, almost no lower lip, her upper lip butterfly shaped, her chin trebled; her arms are crossed. She appears consumed by fierce wonder.

Come to gaze upon your stone god, my fat friend?

I fight my sarcasm. It is the cancer of the gods, debasing of self and server. I try to will emotion into my ocular implants, though I know my eyes remain implacable in this mask of ravaged perfection. It hurts — dear God Dionysus, I suffer so! — being unable to intensify my gaze and let her know I'm watching her. Would she see me as a person, or merely as a prisoner? As a human, or as a god? Statue, deity, criminal: what a trinity for her to admire!

"And over here, children, is Kritios Boy, emblematic of what is known as the Severe Style," Uta says as she walks toward the corner, the girls following her. "The youth within will always be young — until his protein quota runs out and we release him into death, of course." She raps her knuckles against his thigh. "He could have been an old man now, enjoying life and granddaughters, had he not at seven murdered a sister." Most of the girls look white-faced with amazement. The heavyset girl, though, trails behind, glancing over her shoulder at me. Now she stops and turns, cocking her head.

I stare toward her, trying to force my implants to impart my feelings, but my efforts only stir the ghosts of godhood locked within the stone. Memo-

ries of ancient days overwhelm me. I hear faint, harp-accompanied songs heralding Dionysus' name. A young gossamer-clad woman, her hair coiffed and her perfumed skin tawny in the moonlight that breaks between the Parthenon's columns, sits on the marble floor at the base of my pedestal. Beside her, a muscular youth laughs and lifts a long-throated clay vessel to his lips. Purplish wine trickles down his chin and onto his bare chest. She reclines upon the cool marble, her smile inviting. He sets down the vessel and stands above her. Demurely, she closes her eyes. It is not the young Greek she wants, so much as the enstoned god reclining above. He kneels over her and grips her gown at the throat. She blinks her eyes open. Her face clouds with fear. Has Dionysus invested him with such fervor? He tears the gown away and takes her so forcefully that she beats his shoulders with her fists, and he lifts her hips from the floor in his frenzy.

The ancient memories bring pain — and more recent memories, and greater pain. I remember Lorena's lips, a hand upon my wrist, the scent of honeysuckle. Then agony: arrest and trial and brain transplant and sensory deprivation.

I will not recall my human past.

I will not recall my human past.

I will not recall my human past.

The memory dissipates as Uta, stepping around the other girls, grabs the chubby girl by the forearm. "Come along," she says. "I'll have none of you holding back, or wandering off. Pay attention, please; I won't repeat myself."

The girl glances toward me, then looks at the floor. Her mouth and cheeks sag. Slump-shouldered, she allows herself to be pulled in front of Kritios. Youthful and pensive, he's gorgeous, and his hairless genitals have prompted the other girls into new paroxysms of ill-concealed snickering. Uta ignores them and again begins droning. The heavy girl stands with her head bowed and hands clasped.

Uta finishes her speech, and the girl looks my way as the troop files through the far door. Then she's gone — another memory, the room ringing with the diminishing sound of their footsteps. A tangible silence invades, the claustrophobic terror of renewed isolation. . . .

Lorena.

The heavy girl's eyes: deep and dark. Arctic eyes.

Lorena's eyes.

I will not recall. . . .

The memory of Lorena slices through me as though my stone is flesh and emotionally charged.

I will not heed her! Am I not Dionysus the Redeemer, son and consort of the Great Goddess, reborn through death into Her bosom? Surely, I will not forever stay slave to mortal memory and human folly!

Lorena.

Exorcise her, then! Purge her! Give Lorena her one last look!

Darkness. I've awakened, sweating, into the blackness of a large tent. There are but two of us within; I can hear Lorena's shallow breathing. It's snowing outside, but our heater has made the interior tepid and close. The stillness pings in my ears. Can't see my hand! The night presses in on me. I feel like I'm suffocating. Have to get out! How, without stepping on the girl? Fighting for composure, I try to lie quietly, but as time passes, my heartbeat quickens. My mouth tastes like ashes. I sit up and feel around. Can't locate the lamp! The darkness draws tighter. Choking me! I struggle toward where the door should be. I bump something soft; Lorena grunts. Then I'm falling, hoping not to land on her but uncertain which way she's lying. . . .

A shuffling interrupts the memory. I feel like blinking, had I the power, so removed do I feel from the museum. There is movement among the shadows in the hall. I glance closer —

The chubby girl steps into the light, looks back down the corridor, then eases into the room. She hides behind Poseidon's pedestal and looks my way, like a small child peering into a party. Her face, round and smooth, is eager yet slightly dark, pensive, as if underlaid with shadow.

She cranes forward, her hand on the pedestal edge. Her gaze is intense, tunneling up at me. Then, licking her lips, she edges toward me.

"You fear the dark?" Lorena asks, after I crawl over her.

Scrabbling along the tent side, trying to find the door, I hesitate to answer. The fear is unmanly, and I am afraid her subsequent incredulity and possible laughter will haunt me. After all, the Cadre ordered me to this snow- and windswept land to dig titanium and manganese; miners should be accustomed to darkness. Not I; I am claustrophobic. I fear closeness, not Great Slave Lake's isolated living conditions. I therefore surface-mine, riding a ten-foot-high four-legged machine called the Crab, the pressure hose clamped between those steel legs shooting water as hard as a cored-up sample of quartz, me working the gears as sand and soil spray upward. In a matter of hours I can hose a brown breast of taiga to a boulderfield, the mineral-laden overburden flushing downstream to sluices — and Cadre coffers.

"I'm not afraid of anything," I reply. I hear her breath catch in her throat, and I know I shouldn't have lied. She's thirteen and impressionable, this niece of mine, and if I'm to watch her while her parents work graveyard in the pit, she should know that I'm not the fearless and reliant cowboy she believes me to be. "Well, I'm afraid of a lot of things," I say slowly. "But mostly . . . of people who want to tie me down."

Wordlessness follows. The wind has come up, and the tent sides slap. Talk

has dispelled my unease, my fears are forgotten; the door will be simple to find. "Go back to sleep," I whisper, and pat her. "I'll be outside, watching the stars."

She's afraid of people too, she says; people and darkness and the rabid foxes that sometimes come into camp. She wants a kiss to calm her before I leave. She knows I won't be back: a mile away through the snow, a bar stands vigil throughout the Arctic night.

She smells of honeysuckle perfume as I try to find her cheek in the dark. I am unsuccessful. Our lips meet, her girlish mouth soft and warm and, oh, too yielding.

"Daddy?" the chubby girl whispers. She ducks under the velvet rope-barrier and slides her hand up my calf. "Is it you? I know you're in there."

My brain jolts and my stone pulses with the wonder of her hands. I cannot feel her, but I can imagine I can, that is enough — it is all I have, all there is. My gaze meanders down her: small breasts, pudgy belly, the cloth against her thighs. Lorena? A tiny gold chain with wedded hearts adorns her left ankle. She traces her fingertips across my broken wrist, then touches her cheek to the shattered stub. "Maybe you didn't realize you had a daughter," she says quietly. "Mama says she never told you. She says you wouldn't have cared."

She looks at her hand upon my leg. "I . . . I think you would have," she mumbles. "Cared, I mean." Her eyes are moist. She blinks back tears.

"Things, they're not the same back home. Mama and John, they aren't together no more." Her face reddens slightly, and I see anger in her eyes. "Mama got orders for the city. Cadre moved her in with a bachelor. He's a sterile, so she said she wouldn't mind. She said . . ."

Her voice breaks. It's a long time before she continues.

"You go ahead, Mama!" I told her. "You go ahead and see the city." The words spill from her like a rehearsed litany or a prosecution. "I got okayed to stay home. Cadre said I could mind the garden. The other scouts, they help me with the work. At least . . . at least they're s'posed to. We sit around the house and blow smoke and . . . and have fun. The others have fun, I guess." She runs her fingers back through her hair. "Sometimes friends come over." Her eyes brim; tears start down her cheeks. "That's fun too . . . I guess."

Trembling and seemingly incapable of holding her head up, she gazes downward.

"The garden failed. Now Cadre'll send me . . . somewhere. Mama says there's not room for three in her cube. No room for me, she means! Now they'll send me." Her hands ball into fists at her sides. "Why'd you go away, Daddy? Why'd you let them take you!"

I have no answer.

I am a tomb.

Lorena.

"Daddy?"

I . . .

"What," comes a stern voice from the hall, "is going on here!" Uta charges into the room, her face a fury. She unhooks one side of the velvet rope-barrier and, letting it fall, grabs the girl and shakes her. "Get back with the others!"

"I was just . . . just . . ."

"You're going to have some explaining to do, young lady!"

The girl breaks away and backs toward me, her face sagging with fear. "But he's my father!" she insists.

"Don't be ridiculous. Relatives of prisoners aren't allowed on the tour."

The girl stands her ground, arms out and palms up in supplication. "The other girls, they showed me how to cheat the scans." She shakes her head and wipes her cheeks. "All I wanted was to *see* him! Mama said he was here. I know it's him. Robbie Houston. From Calgary."

Uta sighs, then kneels and takes hold of the girl's wrists. "Spectators aren't supposed to know specifics, but I will tell you this much." Her voice has softened. "The man within this statue is from the Caribbean sector, not the Canadian. You hear me? This is just between you and me. No one is to know I told you."

"He's not my daddy?"

"No. None of them. No one in this room is from Canada."

"HE'S NOT MY DADDY?"

Fear and loathing grip the girl's eyes. She twists free from Uta's hold and claws at the holster strap of Uta's gun. She seizes the handle. Will she hold the gun two-fisted toward me? Squeeze the trigger and reduce me to rubble?

Release me?

Please.

Uta yanks the girl's hand away. The girl staggers back against me, clutching her injured fingers to her mouth. "Not my daddy," she mutters. "Not . . ."

She turns and, forehead against my stone, pounds her fists against my leg. "The things I said! Oh, god! The things I planned to say! I hate you! I hate you!"

"I don't know where your daddy is," Uta says, her voice quiet and maternal. She slides her hands over the girl's shoulders. The girl turns, sobbing, and they embrace. "I only know those in this wing. Even if I could tell you, you wouldn't want to hear. Not really."

"I just wanted to *see* him. Before they sent me . . ."

"Easy, now." Uta lifts the girl's chin and searches her eyes. "If your father is here in the museum, then you've got to forget him, child. You've got to go on with your own life. Think of him as having died. It's best that way."

The girl nods, snuffling, fighting for breath.

"Let's go downstairs," Uta says, standing and taking hold of the girl's

hand. "The others are having ice cream. We'll talk again afterward." Uta puts her arm across the girl's shoulders and, after rehooking the rope-barrier, leads her out the door.

They turn the corner and are gone. Stung by Uta's lie, I stare down the empty corridor, their diminishing footsteps sounding like death knolls. How much I have missed, how much more out there than the feel of a spider's feet! How many days and dreams I could have shared!

My silent angry cry awakens Dionysus, and just beyond the range of my sight, a vision of a young Grecian woman and her athletic lover begins to waver and dance. The stone's visual song seems muted. My emotions are a muddle of sarcasm and pain. I strain and squint, trying to have Dionysus bring my mind and the ancient past into focus. I hear laughter then, the light laughter of lovemaking; and now breathy murmuring.

The scene unfolds.

And brings terror.

Two naked bodies writhe within a sleeping bag. It is Lorena and I, her loving uncle. Too loving! How her parents trusted me, and how I violated that trust and love. How long through that Arctic night I clung to her in the torpor of the overheated tent, while outside the frigid wind seemed to howl *No! The horror!* In the weeks that followed, the wind became fear and loss drumming against the tent; until one night the tent door banged open and an explosion of lights dazzled away the surfeit of a momentary doze. I remember the shocked injury and then rage on the faces of my brother and his wife. . . .

Night has fallen. Shadows slant across the marble floor. The room is soundless, save for the almost inaudible hum of a distant generator. Around me, the other statues are as silent as ever. Come morning, I vow upon my statue's soul, I shall see my brothers and the tourists in new light. No longer will Dionysus reside within this stone. I shall struggle to accept my mortality: serve my sentence and purpose as best I humanly can.

For now, darkness shrouds me. The red EXIT light mocks me. I stare toward the door. I cannot seem to look away, as though my vision has solidified like quartz. Beyond is the empty corridor, dark and threatening as the maw of a gun. Beyond that, a daughter embraced in the Cadre's unwelcome arms.

And here, entombed, lies Robert Houston, who invented gods and other excuses long before the judge smiled a slight tight smile as she banged the gavel down.

He was enstoned in his flesh.



MAKE-BELIEVE GREEK LOVER

Lying
Among the pillars standing
White and heat-cracked in the sun,
Her fingers gently touch
The chiseled jaw of carved Adonis,
And roll languorously
As a waterfall
Down still neck and chest unfeeling bare.

Her feminine concern cannot move his hands,
Nor soften the cold
Fixed stare of pale eyes.
His marble thoughts stay frozen,
Thick and stubborn,
His lips unformed with syllables.
Not a hint is in his face that he might answer
Her whispered admirations.

Tears then form, swell, brim, and
Burst lid rims,
Hollowing her cheeks with darkened stains,
For she knows, in her wild-wanting passion,
His heart is stone between beats suspended,
His breath held private and within.
And hers, she did not choose to share again.

If only she had known,
Not love in the simple stone,
The life was in the sculptor
Of the stone-stiff young man.

— Jason J. Marchi

Make-Believe Greek Lover 33

A MASQUERADE OF VOICES

by Susan Palwick
art: Janet Aulisio

Susan Palwick lives in Manhattan, where she works part-time as a PR assistant for an executive search firm.

This story marks her fifth fiction sale. Her last appearance in our pages was "The Visitation," September 1987.

The first thing William Bernes knew after his long confusion was that his three-year-old great-granddaughter, from the vantage of her mother's arms, was snatching at the little doll which hung above his hospital bed. "No," he cried out suddenly, "don't hurt that — that's mine." These were the first words he'd spoken with a clear head since being loaded into the ambulance (how long ago? he must ask), but he saw from the averted gazes of his family that they thought he was still mired in the confusion; he had, indeed, spoken a great deal during the confusion, but none of it with a clear head.

"The toy," he told them now, terribly alarmed because it was swinging back and forth, "the little Christmas doll that Nancy put there — it saved my life."

The child, whose mother had stepped back a foot or so to remove the toy from reach, wrinkled her nose and began the series of hiccups which meant she was preparing to cry. William looked for Nancy but found only the baby's parents and his son-in-law, Nancy's husband, who stood at the foot of the bed, watching him gravely.

"How, Will? How did it save your life?"

"When everything was all confused and I didn't know where I was — why, I spotted that thing and it snapped me right out of it. Like it talked to me, said, 'You're in the hospital now, lying here in bed.' Nancy put it there. Where's Nancy?"

"Are you confused now? Tell me about being confused."

"No, no, I'm not confused now — well, except about what happened when I still was. How I got here, when. . . ."

"It's been four days, Will. You fell. Do you remember that? Falling?"

"Oh boy . . . yes, a little bit; I guess I do." He blinked, terribly weak from the effort of talking this much, of dealing with all these people, although he recognized now that they had been there through much of the confusion, too, standing above his bed looking frightened. He remembered snatches of visits, snatches of the television being on — there had been some show of little boys singing Christmas carols in an Arizona mission, which someone had put on for him because his wife, Marilyn, was in Arizona now, paralyzed by a stroke, unable to fly out to be with the family at Christmas.

"Go," she had managed to tell him, talking with half her face, and because



they had been together for sixty years, he understood the rest she didn't say: silly for you not to be with the children just because I'm tied to this bed, to attendants and tubes and linen changes.

So he had hired people to care for her while he was gone, and had flown East, been given a bedroom in Nancy and David's house, a lovely room except that it wasn't his own, didn't have Marilyn next door, and had defeated him when he had to get up in the middle of the night — furniture emerging from the darkness to bewilder him where no furniture should have been, so that he had fallen with a cry which woke the household.

By the time he was loaded into the ambulance, he no longer had any coherent idea of what was being done to him. His perception of time had become unhinged with an excruciating jolt when he fell, leaving him to grasp at moments which had no sequence: a dizzying stretcher journey down the stairs to the living room; Nancy kneeling next to him wearing a bathrobe and her nurse's stethoscope; someone in huge brown boots (too close to his face), saying, "I don't like the way that leg is lying," and wrenching him, with gentle hands and kind words which did nothing for the pain, onto a stretcher.

They had all been staying in the house: Nancy and David's girl, her husband and the baby — everyone except Marilyn. As he was taken out of the house into a chaos of blinking lights, swaddled in blankets, even his head covered with a towel, they came forward and kissed him, murmuring. Nancy rode in the ambulance with him and held his hand, telling him she loved him, and then he was wheeled into a desolation of white where all the words and caresses faded into a pulsing haze.

David and the children floated by with pale faces; Nancy hung a bright red toy above his bed, "for Christmas," and millions of young girls in pink wound through the corridors singing about bells. Later, the girls in pink turned into little boys in white who sang in Spanish, who bled out of the television into the white room until they fluttered like angels above his head, and the cold New Jersey light from the windows became the golden light he had left behind, the light which flowed through the canyons.

He had no idea where he was, then, and in his terror it was the toy which saved him. His eyes fell on that bright spot of color, the white-bearded little doll with its cheerful black button eyes and red stocking cap, all wrapped up in a red papoose with white polka dots — wrapped up like a baby, except that it was an old man, clearly; and then it told him, very distinctly, You're in the hospital, Will, all trussed up in bandages. In a hospital. That's why everything's white; and in a rush of gratitude he remembered that he, an old man like the little doll, had been wrapped up like it was now, on the stretcher going into the ambulance. He remembered the fall then, and regained what in the confusion he had lost: himself.

"Yes," he told David now, "yes, I remember falling. It's been four days? Four days since then?"

"You broke your hip, Will. It was a bad break; they had to operate. They had to put a pin in. And after the operation you were running a fever, Will, you were all doped up — for the fever and for the pain. That's why you were confused."

"My hip?" he repeated, with a sharp stab of fear. "Broken?"

"A bad break," David said gently.

"But I have to walk! I can't take care of Marilyn if I can't walk — Marilyn! Does she know? David, how long until I can walk?"

"I don't know, Will. You'll have to ask the doctor. It will probably be a while, but you'll be fine. Don't worry."

"Marilyn," he said, aghast, imagining her stuck with attendants, strangers who wouldn't even understand her because half her face was frozen. He pictured her lying there, sick with fear for him as he was for her, and unable to talk to anyone.

"Marilyn," he said again. "I have to tell Marilyn I'll be all right. That I'll be walking again as soon as I can, that I'll come back to her. I have to call her — just so she'll be able to hear my voice. Where's a telephone?" He glanced at the bedside table. "Don't I have a telephone?"

"You'll get one soon. Something's wrong with the wiring in the jack. They have to fix it."

"Well, tell Nancy to tell her, then. Where's Nancy? Why isn't she here?"

"She had some things to do, Will — errands that came up. She'll be here tomorrow, as soon as she can."

There was a small silence in which the baby whimpered, and her mother said, "We've got to be going now, Gramps. We have to get back to Boston. Get better . . ." There was a flurry of kisses and reassurance, people bending over him because he was too weak with pain and worry to raise himself, and then they were all gone, leaving him in the cheerless room.

He looked the place over after they'd left, seeing things from the confusion which he now knew were real, and not madness: one of those plants with the bright red leaves, some presents — he vaguely recalled opening brightly wrapped boxes — a framed photograph of the baby, wearing antlers and a pout, labeled "Maura in the Pre-School Xmas Pageant." He lifted his head to peer at it a moment, puzzling over the thing, and then sank back onto his pillow with a sigh, his hip throbbing.

The toy Santa dangled merrily above the bed, laughing at him with its button eyes, and he looked away, chagrined at having thought that a bit of cloth could talk. He remembered a crib toy he and Marilyn had bought when Nancy was born, a yellow Humpty Dumpty with a manic grin. Nancy had grasped and gurgled at it as Maura had at this one — had in fact treasured it until she was four — but William was old, as old as the doll was made to appear, and no child to talk to toys. He hoped they wouldn't tell Marilyn how he'd behaved over a little doll; it would only make her more afraid for him.

No fear, the toy seemed to say as he was falling asleep, there's no need for fear, Will. Don't be afraid.

But that was falling asleep, when everyone heard voices.

He was afraid, very afraid, when the doctor came to see him the next day. From the confusion, like the smell from a sump which is blown downwind, wafted foul snatches of pain and bewilderment associated with this man who wore such a deadpan expression, who shut the curtain around the bed as if William were a potential embarrassment.

William had prepared himself for this interview since awakening that morning. "Never let doctors intimidate you," Marilyn had always told him, and she never had, not even after the stroke when she had been so completely at the mercy of doctors who knew so much and said so little. The doctors had said "Nursing home" with one breath, and Marilyn with half her face frozen had said "No," steadfastly. She and William had beaten them, proven that he and the visiting nurse could care for her as well as any nursing home, even with the back-breaking work, the lost sleep, and fouled sheets — better, because he loved her and understood not only what she said, but what she couldn't say.

Now he spoke for both of them, as if Marilyn were here with him, drawing strength from her imagined presence to tell the doctor that he absolutely had to be home and on his feet as soon as possible, sooner than possible, because his wife needed him.

The doctor, clearing his throat and frowning down at his hands, answered, "Mr. Bernes, you have to be patient — with yourself, with brittle bones which will take a long time to heal —"

"I don't have a long time! My wife doesn't!"

"After you've gotten some strength back," the doctor continued quietly, "you may be able to use the walker, a little bit, hopping on one leg. That will depend on your balance and on how well the good leg holds up, and on your determination. You won't be able to put full weight on the injured leg for at least six months."

"Six months?"

"At least. In a few days we'll start physical therapy; you'll get a wheelchair and a walker —"

"Can I change my wife's bed from a wheelchair? Can I bathe her balancing on a walker? Tell me that, will you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Well then, find a way I can! And stop looking at me as if you feel sorry for me. You'll have old bones too, soon enough, and you won't want pity then either!"

"Six months, Mr. Bernes. I'm sorry. I'm sure you can find good home care for your wife; rest now."

"I can't." William cried, clutching at the doctor's sleeve. "I can't rest!"

How can anyone expect me to *rest*? Tell me when I can go home!"

"That depends on how quickly the incision heals," the doctor said, and escaped.

Nancy came after lunch, alone, looking exhausted. "I'm sorry I wasn't here yesterday, Dad."

"No, no sorries. Nancy, the doctor says I can't walk for six months. That can't be right, can it? When David broke his ankle last year —"

"That wasn't a bad break, Dad. And he's younger."

"But six months! How will I take care of your mother?"

Nancy grimaced and sighed, covering her face with her hands. "The aides, Dad, the people you hired; they're good. They'll take care of her."

"Not like I could. Never like I could."

"Well, of course not, but it happened! You fell! You can't undo it!" She turned away then and mumbled, "I'm sorry" — Nancy who always apologized whether she needed to or not.

"For what?" Will asked gently. "For my falling? Because I was in your house, didn't know where things were? That's ridiculous."

"For yelling!" she said, nearly yelling again. "It's not fair to you, going through so much — you just can't undo it, that's all. Just . . . just give it time, do what the therapists tell you, listen to the doctors."

"Doctors!"

"Doctors," she repeated flatly. "Just don't let it defeat you, that's all."

"Well, I'm not. How could I, after your mother, the stroke — I'd be ashamed if I let a broken bone stop me. Nancy, what does she say? Does she know? She must know because I wouldn't have gone so long without calling. Nancy, why haven't they fixed the jack yet?"

"I asked them. It's taking longer because of the holidays. It's all right, Dad; she knows. We called her."

"It's not all right! What did she say? How did she react?"

"Dad, I can't tell you much! No one can understand her on the phone, you know that, and the attendants can't understand her as well as you can, anyway. She was upset, of course. She's worried about you, she misses you, she hopes you aren't in much pain."

Too vague, too vague. Marilyn was never vague. "What did she say about the walker, about my not being able to take care of her?"

"She says you have to get well as soon as you can, that you have to get stronger — on your own account, not hers."

William nodded, even though Nancy was using her nurse's voice and he sensed she was inventing likely messages. That was what Marilyn would say, what he knew she'd say, but so far away from his wife that he feared losing touch even with his knowledge of her, he needed to hear it from someone else.

"She says," Nancy went on, "that you mustn't feel guilty about not being able to be with her, that she'll be all right."

"But she's alone! With just the attendants!"

"I know," Nancy said, and then the tightness of her face eased, the haggardness of it, as if she'd just solved a problem. "Dad, look, David and I will fly out there for a day or two. Would that make you feel better?"

"Yes, of course. But the expense —"

"No trouble," Nancy answered quickly. "We can get a flight tonight, stay there tomorrow, and fly back the next morning. Only we won't be able to visit you tomorrow, you understand?"

"I'm not daft. Go. Tell her — you know what. And call me to tell me how she is, Nancy, please; I want to hear it from you, not the aides. Isn't there another phone I can use now? In the hall, in another room?"

She answered as nurse, not daughter. "You need to sleep now. Don't worry. I'll take care of everything, I promise."

"I'll have the phone tomorrow, won't I?"

"I hope so, Dad. I'll remind the nurses about it when I leave." William wondered what it was that made him think she was lying.

The doll, the little toy he'd forgotten to thank Nancy for, spoke to him a great deal that night, twirling gently above him.

In a few more days it will be New Year's Eve, Will. Your leg will be better by this time next year; you'll be back in Arizona, with the canyons and the lovely light, where everything shimmers in the heat and you can see snow on the winter peaks.

"Oh boy," William murmured aloud, "you're quite the prophet. What's all this for?"

Because there's no one to keep you company, the doll laughed, and he said, "Better they should keep Marilyn company."

Marilyn, the doll mused, who counted the rainbows at Niagara Falls on your honeymoon — that's all the water God would have put into floods, she said, but He keeps a promise — Marilyn who began planning a nursery the night Nancy was conceived, knowing it already, Marilyn who helped you build the house you still live in, who was handier than you by far with a hammer or saw, although she never much cared for sewing and preferred your cooking to her own.

"Talkative, aren't you?" Will said, cursing the homesickness that put these voiceless words in his head, but the bit about cooking reminded him of the time Marilyn had somehow substituted baking soda for sugar in a cake recipe so that the batter came oozing out of its pan. He'd been in the yard when he heard her howl of laughter and cry of "Oh, Will, it's a monster!" Some strange insect, he'd thought, and rushed indoors to find her doubled over at the sight of the batter creeping, as if it were alive, through the edges of the oven door.

He laughed aloud, inadvertently summoning a nurse who frowned at him and took his temperature, no doubt believing him in the confusion again.

But he had no fever and warded off the proffered sleeping pill by explaining that he'd woken from a funny dream to which he'd gladly return, once she was kind enough to let him do so.

When the nurse left, he eyed the little doll again, with its papoose and stitched smile, wondering if he were senile, to be hearing voices and remembering all those things that had happened so long ago. "You my imagination?" he asked, frowning. "You an old man's fancy? What else would you be?"

That's enough, if it's comfort.

He grunted assent, growing tired, and held off sleep by asking, "Why a doll, then? Why not just me talking to myself, and knowing it so?"

Because I was something bright, to pull you out of the confusion — something for your eyes to fall on when they wandered. And because I'm old like you and all trussed up like you are, unable to move. But cheerful — so there's hope, then, Will. See?

He nodded. Nancy had given him the toy, Nancy with her nurse's training and her clever heart, who had inherited her mother's wisdom. When Nancy, six or seven years old, was miserable with the measles, Marilyn had unearthed the manic yellow Humpty Dumpty from some closet and hung it above the child's bed.

"When people are sick," she told the girl, "they act younger for a little while because the part of your mind that's growing and learning new things has to stop doing that to help the medicine heal your sick body. That happens to everybody, so it's all right to have a baby toy now. I had the chicken pox when I was twelve, and I kept my teddy bear with me the whole time."

That reassured Nancy, to whom twelve had seemed ancient; William wondered if she'd remembered the incident when she bought the Santa doll. He'd have to ask her about it.

Best not, the doll counseled him. At least don't let on about voices. She'd be scared.

"Afraid of death," William suggested drowsily, and in the light from the hospital corridor the Santa seemed to wink at him from its papoose.

Maybe. Rest now.

"What would have rescued me if Nancy hadn't hung you there, I wonder? The plant? The picture of little Maura?"

Maura has her own voice, or will; plants have none people understand. Toys and animals are most likely to speak in the absence of people — but toys are better, Will, because people make them to begin with, and so the masquerade is honest.

That part puzzled him, deviating enough from sense so that he feared the return of the confusion, but he was already falling asleep, a healthy sleep with no fever or dreams that he remembered.

He didn't get his telephone the next day. Someone came early and deposited a walker in his room, its chilly angularity just out of reach, but there

was no one to show him how to use it. He sat in bed and fretted, watching the stream of visitors and overworked staff in the hallways, becoming more frustrated with each jangle of a telephone in another room or at the nursing station. Nurses brushed him off with hurried explanations about holiday shortages of maintenance personnel. Finally, in desperation at his enforced solitude, he addressed the doll.

"You still there? Hey, intuition, whatever you are — say something."

Talk to the poinsettia, Will. It will help it grow.

"It doesn't talk back."

No, the doll agreed. But sometimes when you're frightened, it's best to do something useful.

"Like helping Marilyn," he replied bitterly, remembering how his devotion to her had been, in the early days after the stroke, as much a distraction from his terror as an expression of love. "If I could do that, I wouldn't be here! Six months of being useless to my wife!"

If you spend the time getting stronger, you won't be useless to anyone. The people who love you know that. You're already strong enough not to need voices anymore.

"You going away?"

Yes, and soon.

"Where? Back into my head?"

If you keep me there, that's where I'll be — with the light in the canyons and that monster cake. Talk to the poinsettia, Will, and Nancy, and Maura; talk to growing things. That's always best.

"I want to talk to Marilyn again! I want to go home!"

The aide entering the room with his lunch tray said wearily, "Everybody here wants to go home, Mr. Bernes. If it were up to us, you'd all heal up in a twinkle and be home with a click of your heels, like Dorothy, and so would we. This place is never nice, but it's ten times worse during the holidays."

As if to accentuate the point, she managed to spill a cup of soup on the bed. By the time the mess was cleaned up and the linen changed, William no longer felt like eating anything or talking to anyone. The repairman never came and the doll remained mute. Finally, unable to bear the silence and his immobility, he turned on the television set and numbed himself with news and old movies until dinner came, and long after that the blessed sleeping pill.

The doctor examined him after breakfast the next morning, probing the incision with gentle fingers. "This is coming along fine, Mr. Bernes. How's the pain? Better? Good — then you can start using the walker tomorrow. I'll notify the therapists."

"When will you know if it will be sooner than six months?"

The doctor gave him a sharp glance. "That depends on how quickly the bone knits."

William nodded, unable to contest this. "All right. Your terms, then. But is there any reason why I can't have the therapy at home?"

"None at all," the doctor said quietly. "In fact that's what we recommend, once the acute-care phase is over."

"Good. Now: when am I getting my phone? My daughter told me the jack should have been fixed yesterday, but it wasn't. The holidays, the nurses said. I need a phone."

"Of course," the doctor murmured, and William had that sense of evasion again, the one he'd gotten from Nancy before she went to Arizona. He frowned, knowing how Marilyn felt about such things. Never let hospitals intimidate you.

"I have to call my wife. Isn't there another phone I can use?"

"Your daughter and her husband are waiting outside to see you," the doctor said quickly, as if that explained something. "I'll send them in."

Oh God, William thought, his gorge rising, something's wrong, something's happened in Arizona, and that's why I've been getting the run-around — I never should have left her, never! Not for the holidays, not for anything!

He lay on the bed, marooned by his injury, trembling; after an age Nancy and David came in, their faces worn with fatigue. "Marilyn," he demanded.

"Dad," Nancy began, with evident effort, "the night you fell —"

"Marilyn?"

"She went into a coma," Nancy said, the words coming in a rush now. "We wanted to tell you, we did, but it wouldn't have made sense so soon after the operation. You were so weak."

The room was quiet, too quiet, Nancy staring at David's hands where they held her own, noises from the hall becoming distinct in the sudden silence. William drew a ragged breath, dizzy with dread and terrible certainty. "Gone, then. Or you wouldn't be telling me now."

"She died two days ago," Nancy went on. "That's why I didn't visit that day. Dad, the funeral was yesterday . . . you know she never wanted a wake — you couldn't have gone, we didn't know if you were strong enough to hear it then!" Her voice had risen; she met his gaze now, pleading. "So I told you we were going to see her, when you were so worried. To explain why we'd be gone. I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

"Marilyn," William said, and wondered if she had felt like this after the stroke, as if half of her heart had been torn away without explanation or excuse. David, in the background, stuttered on apologies.

"She was what made you want to get well — we didn't want to pull all of that away at once, didn't want you to call and get suspicious, so we told them not to give you a phone. Will, you must hate us for it."

"No," William said, "I don't hate you." He stared at the silent doll, aching, trying to find something concrete to cling to as Nancy rattled on about the doctor having said he seemed to be doing better now. "Give me times,

Nancy — the coma, the death, the funeral. Dates . . . times."

Nancy swallowed. "She went into the coma the same night you fell. Within an hour, I think. Almost like —"

"Yes. Go on."

"She died two days ago, at about four . . . five, maybe. The funeral — it was yesterday. At ten."

"Arizona time? Noon here, then."

"Will," David said gently, "the aides did the best they could, the hospital did — it wasn't anyone's fault, least of all yours. You mustn't feel guilty for not being with her. You couldn't have changed it."

"No," William answered, "I know that." It formed a pattern now: the coma when he fell, the death the same day the doll summoned him back from his delirium, the funeral yesterday, at just the time the voice went away. Marilyn had come to him when he needed her, in the only way she could, and in her fashion, had tricked him into believing the source of the voice to be himself so that he would accept the strengths it suggested as his own and still have them when she had left for good — and be comforted, thinking back on words which now took on new meanings.

If you keep me there, that's where I'll be, the voice had told him, and perhaps it was true; perhaps he was more complete than he thought, even now when he felt as though the sky had collapsed and smothered him and he would never find his way out from under it.

He looked up at the toy, which was nothing but cloth and yarn. "Nancy, the little doll; will you send it to Maura for me? She liked it."

Nancy and David stared at him, uncomprehending, and to reassure them and the voice which might be within him even now and perhaps himself, he turned to face the ugly aluminum walker, hating it, and said, "I still have to use this thing, don't I?"



THAUMATURGY

The spell is spoken, words like rocks
fall heavy from the lips of the warlock.
Stones drop from air to earth, and from earth
to air comes black vapor, and ink-mist.
Too late, too late, the error is carved
and no chisel at hand, the witch learns his fate.

— Michael Stiles

SCIENCE FICTION ON VIDEO: Aliens Within and Without by Matthew J. Costello

This is the third of a four-part series that traces the history and evolution of science-fiction films, the major themes, and the technological breakthroughs. The first two installments, "Classics of the Silent Era" (January 1988) and "German Expressionism Meets Hollywood" (May 1988), were also written by Matthew J. Costello.

Let me start by warning the more conservative film historians who may be reading this article that my initial thesis is bound to raise a few eyebrows.

But first, in the mood of the serials of the 1930s and 1940s, a brief recap.

The daring science-fiction films of the silent era — Willis O'Brien's *The Lost World* (1925), Fritz Lang's *Die Frau im Mond* (1929), Paul Wegener's *Der Golem* (1920) — were followed by a trio of sound masterpieces of the 1930s: *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Invisible Man* (1933), and *King Kong* (1933). *Frankenstein* and *The Invisible Man*, both directed by James Whale, were filled with the dark brooding imagery of German Expressionism. But with the 1940s SF wilted, in general, to those silly but lovable exercises in credulity called serials. There was, though, a landmark of sorts, a film that ended the two decades and set the stage for the tremendous explosion of films in the '50s.

It was, improbably enough, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948). This movie, Universal's last effort to pump some more money out of the once-lucrative *Frankenstein* franchise, played with all the expressionistic conventions. The brooding hallways, the shadowy lighting were there, but the locale this time was Florida, and

the warm light of Abbott and Costello's humor cut through the musty air like a German cleaning-frau on a rampage. This movie signaled the end. Through its humor, it suggested that it was time for new themes, new directions.

And now we come to my thesis.

What altered the moribund genre of the SF film? What turned SF into the tremendous moneymaker that attracted every major studio (and dozens of minor ones) to launch SF films, some of them prestigious items with big budgets? The catalyst was none other than Howdy Doody: TV personality, and Doodyville's most famous resident. And I don't make this claim lightly.

In 1948, RCA and General David Sarnoff, chairman of the board at RCA, were trying to get the medium of television to penetrate the American home, as TV hadn't yet made its expected impact. Wrestling matches, concerts, and occasional dramatic specials just didn't get everyone interested in the medium.

Enter Howdy. Sarnoff asked a popular NBC radio host, one Bob Smith from Buffalo, New York, to put together a program for a then largely ignored audience: children. Bob Smith created a show around a character featured on his radio program, and had a mario-

nette constructed. The rest is history. Smith launched a campaign to have children elect Howdy Doody president in 1948, and the show's popularity just grew and grew. If a child had a TV, his neighborhood friends swarmed around his house waiting for the early evening show. Children badgered their parents into buying TVs, and moms were quick to discover the advantage of having the dear little ones occupied while preparing dinner.

The attraction to Howdy Doody was irresistible. Howdy became a licensing phenomenon, with his image appearing on jam jars, bread wrappers, and shoes. Thanks to Howdy, television arrived.

Now that TV was in America's homes, there had to be more programs. So the children got Howdy Doody, while their parents watched Uncle Milty and Sid Caesar and a host of other programs, many now lost from that era before videotape.

And the movie industry started dying. The box-office plunge began in the late 1940s, but really picked up speed in the early years of the '50s. Approximately 15,000 TV sets were in use during 1947. When Howdy Doody inaugurated the New York-Chicago coaxial cable, however, the show was viewed by an audience of nearly 18 million viewers. And by June of 1950, weekly box-office sales hit a new low — 60 million — the worst since the Depression in 1932. In 1951, 700 theaters closed nationwide.

Hollywood was challenged to offer something that couldn't be found on television. First wide-screen cinema-scope (or Superscope, or VistaVision, or any one of a dozen other different wide-angle film ratios). Then 3-D. And finally, perhaps most successfully, science fiction.

SF films appealed to the burgeoning

crop of children growing up in the 1950s. Such films offered spectacle and shocks far removed from the safe, cozy world of *The Life of Reilly* and *The Loretta Young Show*. It was the perfect type of film for the explosion of drive-ins across the country — a few chills and spills to get your poodle-skirted sweetheart snuggling real close.

A scene from *The Wild One* (1954), with Marlon Brando as the sleek, snarling prototypical biker best reflects the prevalent attitude. When asked what he was rebelling against, Brando answered, his eyes rolling up, "Whaddya got?" America's youth, in the illusory calm of the 1950s, asked Hollywood the same question. And the answer, to all of our delight, was science fiction.

The themes of SF in the '50s were largely concerned with fear and paranoia — a dark contrast to the sunny TV shows of the Eisenhower years. Science, and scientists, would become suspect, finally even dangerous. Aliens were everywhere but, like McCarthy's mysterious Commies, they would look much like our neighbors. Finally, social, political, and scientific changes would overwhelm that great American film archetype: the individual.

An incredible explosion of the SF film genre took place in the 1950s, but it would last only 8 years. And it began with a most atypical SF film.

Destination Moon (George Pal Productions, color, 1950, 91 min.), was, like all of Pal's projects, very much his dream-child. This story realistically portrayed the first trip to the Moon.

Like many key films of the era, *Destination Moon* used a contemporary SF source: in this case, Robert Heinlein's *Rocketship Galileo*. Heinlein was hired as a consultant. Other "outside" sources were brought onto the film.

Walter Lantz created a special Woody Woodpecker cartoon to help explain the intricacies of escape velocity, flight trajectory, and the actual journey itself. Chesley Bonestell painted the incredible lunar backdrop. But most importantly, Herman Oberth was a scientific advisor to the film, a role he had served on the last serious film devoted to space travel, over twenty years previously, Fritz Lang's *Die Frau im Mond*.

Yet there is a different tone to this film, something new that indicates where the real sensibilities of '50s SF cinema lie. It plays a small part in *Destination Moon*, but it reflects what the '50s were all about. As the film begins, all the industry tycoons are considering supporting the flight, and their fears and paranoia are openly played upon. What if someone else got to the Moon first? Such a thought is all that's needed to spur approval of the venture. It's American capitalism against mindless, godless communism.

Pal, who made his mark producing the stop-motion shorts "Puppetoons," lavished remarkable attention on the special effects of the film. His work in the 1950s, on such spectacles as *The War of the Worlds* (1953) and *When Worlds Collide* (1951), was very much the state of the art of its day. The five minutes of miniature animation took as long to film as the 85 minutes of live-action work — a far cry from the sputtering rockets of Flash Gordon. And over 100 people spent two months building the moonscape. 2000 gel-covered auto lights were used for the stellar backdrop.

But even more significant than the technical care that went into the film is the fact that *Destination Moon* dares present the tedium of space travel, with the bored travelers playing a harmonica or staring out the view port

— a sensibility we wouldn't see again until *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The film's flat documentary approach was soon aped by countless lesser projects, ending the influence of the shadowy, expressionistic look of horror films of the previous decades.

Phil Hardy, in *Science Fiction, the Film Encyclopedia*, says that the film's "critical success . . . was to revive a stultifying genre. Science fiction became the medium in which various responses to the facts of the atomic age were played out in the cinema."

While Pal was making this movie, he became worried that another space travel film, *Rocketship X-M* (Lippert, b&w, 1950, 78 min.), would be released before his. And *Rocketship X-M*'s director, Kurt Neumann, succeeded in getting his film in the theaters first. And though it has cave-dwelling Martians and the other folderol of space opera, *Rocketship X-M* is a truer representation of the thematic trend of SF films of the 1950s.

Bill Warren, whose two-volume set *Keep Watching the Skies!* is the ultimate source book on 1950s SF films, rates *Destination Moon* as one of the four key SF films of all time.

But those who hoped for realistic science-fiction films were in for a rough decade. Although *Destination Moon* was important in attracting interest in SF films, it was a false start because, outside of Pal's tedious *The Conquest of Space* (1955), there wouldn't be another serious space travel film until Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Two films, both released in 1951, are indicative of the actual trends that SF films would follow. One introduces a theme that would be largely ignored until the 1960s, while the other

remains one of the most powerful SF films ever made. Both *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Thing* deal with a lone alien coming to Earth. Both carry a message about the universe we live in. And both are based on stories originally published in *Astounding*. But there the similarities end.

In *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Twentieth-Century Fox, b&w, 1951, 92 min.), Michael Rennie's Klaatu is an alien visitor on a benevolent mission. He arrives to warn us of our danger to ourselves and others who reside in the solar system. And, with the help of his robot — the shiny, solemn Gort — he conveys this message: if the Earth can't beat its weapons into ploughshares, then the forces of control (in this case, Gort and other robot guardians) will take steps against the aggressor. After his dramatic arrival in one of the best animated saucer sequences of any '50s film, Klaatu then secretly spends time living with some Earthlings, to learn about them from personal encounters.

The film is curious for a number of reasons. First, it has a world view that is incompatible with the reality of the Red-baiting 1950s. When someone representing the president tries to explain that there are evil forces afoot in the world, Klaatu cuts him off saying, "I am not concerned . . . with the internal affairs of your planet. I consider that to be *your* business, not mine."

Second, the religious imagery — Klaatu's arrival from above, his death and resurrection — are unusual '50s elements. Hollywood of that era is not known for its allegories. Bill Warren quotes screenwriter Edmund H. North on the religious overtones: "I didn't honestly expect audiences to pick up the allusions. I never wanted it to be a

conscious thing, but I thought it had value being there."

The film is smoothly directed by Robert Wise, later at the helm of *The Sound of Music* (1965) and *Star Trek — The Motion Picture* (1979). *The Day the Earth Stood Still* presents the flat, clean, almost-documentary style that is found in so many of the decade's SF films. No murky shadows or strange camera angles here. Everything is played with cool realism.

The very human performance of Michael Rennie's alien makes the film memorable. Gort marks the first in a line of convincing robots that includes Robby from *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and R2D2 from *Star Wars* (1977). The film's message — the danger of nuclear annihilation — did not become a primary concern of 1950s SF films, however. This film's vision of a peaceful world uniting together to save itself was completely incongruous to the paranoia of the era.

No matter. Nuclear war would emerge as a powerful theme in other decades, starting with 1959 and the still-haunting *On the Beach*. And benevolent aliens would arrive in droves, in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982).

The darker concerns of the Eisenhower years were better represented by another, decidedly grimmer film.

The Thing (Winchester Pictures/RKO, b&w, 1951, 87 min.) was also called *The Thing from Another World* after Phil Harris released a popular song entitled "The Thing." Science-fiction author and film director Michael Crichton refers to it as "the best science fiction film ever made," but when it was released, the SF community attacked it for what Phil Hardy describes as a "radical betrayal of its source."

That source is a chilling story called *Who Goes There?* written by *Astounding* editor John W. Campbell, Jr. The film does ignore the most fascinating aspect of Campbell's powerful story, namely the alien's ability to mimic the appearance of any other life form. Mimicry does become a central theme to the 1950s, but 1951 may have been just a tad early for a full-blown treatment of the idea. But Campbell's oppressive, arctic environment and the tremendous sense of isolation of a small group under siege are all admirably depicted by *The Thing*.

It's not the straightforward story of an alien monster that sets *The Thing* apart. The direction, though credited to Christian Nyby, shows the hand of producer Howard Hawks. The anxious looks exchanged between characters and the overlapping dialogue that grows harder and harder to understand as the danger grows are all Hawks's trademarks. When asked who directed the film, Kenneth Tobey, who plays the cool-headed Captain Patrick Henry, replied, "Howard Hawks." Though Nyby did the actual on-site directing, Tobey explained, Hawks rehearsed the scenes and oversaw the whole project.

The Thing is important for more than its tight direction. When the chief scientist Carrington describes the alien as having, "No pleasure . . . no pain . . . no emotions, our superior in every way," he is voicing a central theme of '50s SF. Feelings, never in question before now, become central to a consideration of what's human . . . and what's alien. And how you feel would become a dominant motif in the feel-good psychedelic era of the 1960s, as the children from the '50s staged their cultural revolt.

The technical apparatus of the scientific base introduces a nouveau expres-

sionism, its Quonset huts and metallic corridors serving the same function that the shadowy corridors of Baron Frankenstein's castle did. Science is not friendly here. Carrington risks everyone's life in the interest of "knowledge . . . more important than life." Science and scientists are presented as misguided, even dangerous. And the universe, its aliens and the unknown, are even more unhealthy. The fear and paranoia of the 1950s would find more explicit depictions than in this film, but it starts, powerfully, right here.

A few other comments on the film's influence:

Ridley Scott's film *Alien* prowls similar territory as that of *The Thing*. On board the *Nostromo* the crew talks with the same natural patter found in Hawks's film. These crew members are also isolated, facing a voracious alien bent on their destruction.

We then remember the scene in *Frankenstein* in which Fritz comes to torture the monster with fire. In *The Thing*, fire is used to attack the alien and ultimately destroy it as it melts into the ground, sizzling into a dark, smudgy pile under a trio of flashing electric arcs. This, then, is the new wicked witch, this time from outer space. As Scotty, the film's stereotypical reporter broadcasts at the end of *The Thing*, we'd better "keep watching the skies!"

And, as we discovered in the McCarthy years, our neighbors as well.

Invaders from Mars was described as a "disturbing" movie, especially for the young Doody-ites who made up the bulk of its audience. It was one thing to watch the Howdy's TV clown Clarabell acting like an out-of-control three-year-old, squirting everyone with

seltzer. That was a crazy sort of anarchy children could relate to. It was quite another thing to see all the symbols of authority — police, neighbors, and parents — perverted into alien monsters. The story of *Invaders from Mars* (National Pictures Corp., color, 1953, 82 min.) is easily told. A boy, David, goes to sleep, wakes up to see a meteor crashing into a sandpit just behind his house, and then watches, horribly, helplessly, as authority figures are sucked into the sand, only to emerge as feelingless dupes of the alien invaders. *Invaders from Mars* presents the next phase in the development of the theme from *The Thing*. The feelingless alien menace now attempts to control humans by capturing and brainwashing them.

This powerful idea was expertly executed and directed by William Cameron Menzies. Menzies directed the interesting *Things To Come* (1936), giving the stolid film's scenes of the future a complete, rounded look. It was as a designer that Menzies' real genius lay. Bill Warren describes Menzies as "certainly the greatest and most innovative designer ever to work on movies." Menzies was responsible for the look of much of *Gone with the Wind* (1939), contributing over 3,000 color sketches, and he staged the burning of Atlanta sequence. His other pictures, such as the quirky horror film *The Maze* (1953), all show signs of his brilliance. Yet in *Invaders from Mars*, while playing with the growing fear of the Red menace, he was able to hit a deep and resonant chord: the very fear of becoming a stranger to those we love. *Invaders from Mars*, while flawed, is his masterpiece.

Eventually, young David gets to use the Martians' own heat/tunneling ray gun against them, helping to stop the Invaders . . . just as any red-blooded

American boy would do, foreshadowing the child-centered SF heroes of the 1970s and 1980s. Except David wakes up to find out that it was all a dream. He stares out the window, and, in the now-famous scene, he watches another, perhaps real ship crash into the sandpit.

Dennis Saleh, in his book *Science Fiction Gold*, calls the film "the definitive science-fiction movie of the child," and few of my peers who saw the film in the 1950s ever forgot it. Despite Jimmy Hunt's labored acting as David, he tapped into every child's fear. And Menzies' eerie set design, assisted by composer Raoul Kraushaar's strange music, created unforgettable images.

Menzies won the first Academy Award for art direction in 1928. In *Invaders from Mars* he showed the power of the "look" of a film, a power that could overcome weak acting and a weak script. In the '70s and '80s, the design of big-budget SF would become all-important, from the wet, gritty tech of Ridley Scott's *Alien*, featuring H. R. Giger's designs, to Ralph McQuarrie's work on George Lucas's *Star Wars*.

The disturbing theme of *Invaders from Mars* was taken a step forward in Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Walter Wanger Productions, b&w, 1956, 80 min.), based on Jack Finney's novel *Sleep No More*.

The action of the film takes place in the fictitious small California town of Santa Mira and, unlike *Invaders from Mars*, is filmed, for the most part, in the new flat, documentary style. This format lends a disturbing air of realism to the proceedings, a mood maintained almost to the end of the film.

The film opens with a hysterical Dr. Miles Bennell declaring that giant seeds are being trucked all over the

state, seeds that can replicate any living being and take its place. We then experience his story in a flashback.

Dr. Bennel returns to the Pacific town from a convention and discovers patients claiming that dear old dad or Uncle Ira aren't quite "right." Oh, they look the same, and they know everything they should — names, dates, etc. As one of Miles's patients complains, "There is no difference you can actually see."

So as Miles rekindles his romance with his old heartthrob, Becky Driscoll, he slowly becomes aware that something is going seriously awry in Santa Mira. When a friend calls about a body on his pool table — a body that looks like a blank, ready to be formed — the truth begins to dawn on Miles. By the time the first seedpods are found in the greenhouse, while Miles and his friends are engaged in a backyard barbecue, it's already too late to stop the invasion. The psychiatrist, the police, the switchboard operators, and ultimately the whole town have been replaced by pod-people.

Miles and Becky seek to escape, but she falls asleep. When Miles kisses her, in a twisted allusion to Snow White, she awakens and we know the truth: she has become one of them. Miles runs away and climbs onto a truck filled with seedpods. He falls back, into the traffic, screaming at the camera, "You're next!"

For much of America it was, perhaps, too late. Though Siegel's powerful little film (shot in a mere 19 days) has been used as an anti-communist and anti-McCarthyite polemic, it is basically anti-pod, that state of being where there is no pleasure, no pain, no feeling. Pods, as Siegel called such people, became a lifelong preoccupation for this future director of Clint

Eastwood films like *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979). "In my life," Siegel said, "I am sorry to say I have kissed many pods. To be a pod means you have no passion, no empathy, you talk automatically. The spark of life has left you."

Special effects are minimal, but effective. Pods open up and human forms bubble out, covered with spittle. But the zombie-like humans are the real show, and Miles, like David in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, learns that authority is not to be trusted.

Siegel was very much against the framing device of the flashback and the reassuring ending wherein a truck of pods turns over, confirming Miles's crazed story. Of the Criterion Laser-Disc version of the film (presented in its original wide-screen ratio), he says, "It lets you know right away that something unusual is going on." He preferred the more subtle title *Sleep No More*, not giving away the whole story right from the start.

Despite the stylized, over-heated ending, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* remains one of the most powerful films and a true classic of the 1950s.

For a more personal treatment of the invaders-among-us theme, we can turn to the film-noir effort *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (Paramount, b&w, 1958, 78 min.). Despite its deliciously tawdry and lurid title, the film is a tight little classic.

Tom Tryon, who later left acting for a successful career as a novelist, has the misfortune of meeting up with some tentacled invaders after his bachelor party. An alien duplicates his appearance and then takes his place, marrying his girl, and settling down in a small Pacific town. And now things get interesting as the film plays with that sacred institution of marriage. The '50s were a prudish era, with the

social realism and freedom of the late '60s a revolution away. This film plays with its titillating theme, as we wonder what strangeness the honeymoon night might bring. Though the dog can tell that Tryon isn't quite right, his bride is only concerned by his distracted behavior. There doesn't seem to be anything *really* wrong. The aliens in this film are no glassy-eyed zombies.

Again the police, who should be the source of security, join forces with the invaders. Phone lines are controlled, as images of the alien police state dance in our head, and in many respects we are in familiar SF territory.

But there are important differences between this film and others of its ilk. Tryon's alien becomes concerned with its role, to the point of developing affection for his "wife." The staging of the film is very much film noir, with heavy, ominous shadows. A flash of lightning reveals the alien beneath its human host.

It's not surprising to learn that the film was directed by Gene Fowler, Jr., who worked with Fritz Lang as an editor. More than any other film I watched for this article, this one is a throwback to the cinematography of the 1930s and 1940s. Yet in other respects, it breaks new ground. Phil Hardy, in his *Science Fiction, the Film Encyclopedia* says, "While the film was clearly fueled by the Cold War mentality of the '50s, in retrospect it is its sexual politics that are more interesting and disturbing."

While the alien/humans are different from us, they are not so noticeably different that we feeling, pleasure-oriented humans can easily spot them. There is a commonality to the two species, despite the vast differences. And the meeting ground in this film is the need to reproduce. As it ends, the aliens' plans are thwarted by Tryon's

character and his "wife," and all the real humans are freed.

There would be other films with possessed humans, most notably the stylish *The Crawling Eye* (1958). But with the dark and grisly *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*, science-fiction films of the '50s had almost gone about as far as they could go.

Almost . . . but not quite.

The Fly (Twentieth-Century Fox, color, 1958, 94 min.), for all its crazy absurdity, is a more reasoned, almost somber effort. Kurt Neumann, who rushed *Rocketship X-M* to the theaters before *Destination Moon* was released, directed the story in a very straightforward style. The tale of a scientist playing with matter transmitters becomes gripping and believable. James Clavell, soon to begin writing a series of best-selling novels, was hired to craft a screenplay with realistic dialogue for a situation that was utterly ridiculous.

The scientist, played by David Hedison, accidentally transmits himself while a fly is in the chamber. He emerges with a fly's head (hidden for much of the movie), whereas, presumably, a strange little fly is buzzing around with a human head. The scientist then works to rectify his horrible transformation, instructing his wife to search for that special fly. His son catches it at one point, but the fly gets away. But the scientist's efforts are hopeless, for the fly's mentality begins to take over and he becomes a monster, dangerous to his wife.

The film has one of the most shocking climaxes of any SF film. Realizing the futility, and the danger, the scientist asks his wife to meet him near a press. He explains that she is to push a specific button while he puts his head between the plates of the enormous

press. It's an absolutely telling scene, remarkable for the idea of sacrifice — not a trait common to creatures in the '50s — and the wife's terrified, hysterical acceptance of what she must do.

The fly's head is crushed, and the wife is accused of his murder. Her story, naturally, is disbelieved.

Until the police inspector, in the company of the scientist's brother, played by Vincent Price, comes across a spider's web and, at its center, a fly, struggling futilely. They bend closer . . . and in a never-to-be-forgotten moment they hear it call, "Help me! Help mee!" Price crushes the trapped fly just as a spider is about to bite it.

And so, to some extent, we come full circle . . . from aliens outside our world (*The Thing*), to aliens beside us (*Invaders from Mars*), to finally aliens inside us, slowly taking over (*The Fly*).

Another film that presents a different view of the dissolution of a human, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Universal Pictures, b&w, 1957, 81 min.), was scripted by Richard Matheson from his own novel.

A man on his boat is buffeted by a radioactive cloud, and he begins shrinking. Though this problem is hardly noticeable at first, he is eventually reduced to an almost child-like status in his house. There, he lives like a toy, in a doll's house. When the cat terrorizes him, he has to abandon even that semblance of home for refuge in the basement where he faces a now-monstrous spider.

The film is marvelous for its special effects — an uncommon quality of other films of the era. The matte photography and blue-screen effects by Clifford Stine and Tom McCrory make the tiny man's nightmare credible. In an interview in the magazine *Cinefantastique*, Matheson said that he only recently had come to like the picture:

"I appreciate it more all the time. I think the visual aspects are remarkable, and the director, Jack Arnold, creates quite a mood in the film."

From the Moon to a man smaller than a microbe — the film statement of the '50s was less an external one about life in the solar system than an internal one of man's insecurity and doubt. The real vastness and the real monsters lie within.

Special effects were not a dominant force. Most of the best films were stark and simple.

There were exceptions. *Forbidden Planet* (MGM, color, 1956, 98 min.), MGM's big-budget retelling of *The Tempest*, remains an engrossing spectacle. The massive underground city of the Krell was built as a miniature, and Disney Studios helped with the animated effect of the creature from the id. It remains the only major special-effects film of the 1950s that wasn't a George Pal production. Additionally, *Forbidden Planet* offers a unique mixture of literature, fable, and high-tech adventure.

But it largely stands alone. A science fiction of ideas would arrive, most notably with the often literary, sometimes juvenile, always allegorical *Star Trek*. And the next large-scale special-effects film would be another MGM production in the late '60s, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Them! (Warner Bros., b&w, 1954, 93 min.) unleashed big mutants as a Hollywood SF staple. *Them!* is a taut thriller, very suspenseful in its first half, before we know that "them" are radioactive ants. The film also established the desert locale as neogothic setting for strange doings, followed by films ranging from *It Came From Outer Space* (1953) to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Other films about mutants soon followed, most with a similar mystery format that didn't work. (We knew from the titles that some oversized creature was bound to appear sooner or later.) These films brought us a giant octopus, a tarantula, a mantis, crabs, and (good grief!) rabbits. Willis O'Brien, who animated *King Kong*, created a realistic dinosaur in *Behemoth*. Ray Harryhausen, O'Brien's protégé, plied his trade in many of these pictures, producing memorable stop-motion creatures.

More important is *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (Harbel Productions, b&w, 1959, 95 min.). It's the story of a white man, a white woman, and a black man — lone survivors of a nuclear war. The film seems to teeter on the edge of violence before the three join hands, ready to forge a brave new world. Its use of a black star, Harry Belafonte, caused a stir in the 1950s, but the film seems almost quaint now.

On the Beach (Lomitas, b&w, 1959, 134 min.), with its big stars (Gregory Peck, Fred Astaire, and Ava Gardner), showed that Hollywood could deal with the future soberly (perhaps a bit too soberly) and that a speculative film didn't have to be merely exploitative.

Then there's Hammer Studios . . .

With *The Curse of Frankenstein* (A Hammer Film Production, color, 1957, 83 min.) director Terence Fisher undercut the Victorian atmosphere of Mary Shelley's tale with the cold blade of Baron Frankenstein's scalpel. The story focuses on the creator, not merely misguided here but evil, willing to murder to obtain a brain. Watching the film, we see a rough, visceral mood, light-years removed from the safe gloomy *Frankenstein* of James Whale. There's no happy ending. The Baron is imprisoned for his crimes and must

accept his responsibility. This is not the happy world of Universal Pictures, where the Baron gets to toast the House of Frankenstein.

The myth and the fantasy were suddenly replaced with a new, almost painful reality. Science-fiction and horror films to come would no longer be as easy to watch. As in *The Curse of Frankenstein*, there would be blood and suffering. And, for the characters at least, a responsibility for one's actions. It was a concept whose time had come.

A word on sources, and suggestions for further reading.

Many of the books mentioned in the previous articles remain key works. But the 1950s are blessed with a tremendous two-volume set, *Keep Watching The Skies!* (McFarland & Co. Inc., 1982), a loving, personal history of every film of the era by film historian Bill Warren. This set should be owned by any lover of SF films.

Dennis Saleh's *Science Fiction Gold* (McGraw-Hill, 1979) is a more selective survey, featuring interesting background on the best '50s SF, and some smashing photos.

Twenty All Time Science Fiction Films by Von Gundten and Stock (Arlington House, 1982) has a thorough re-telling of twenty important films, twelve of which are from the '50s. The book also includes a remarkable filmography for the major stars and directors of the films.

Danny Peary's *Guide for the Film Fanatic* (Fireside Books, 1986) is always interesting to read, and *The I Was a Teenage Juvenile Delinquent Rock n Roll Horror Beach Party Movie Book* (St. Martin's Press, 1986) by Alan Betrock is an entertaining guide to the more exploitative SF films.

And, as always, Phil Hardy's *Science*

Fiction, the Film Encyclopedia (William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1984) is an indispensable guide.

Most of the films covered in detail are readily available. But *I Married a Monster From Outer Space* proved difficult to locate, and *Facets* (1517 West Fullerton Ave., Chicago IL 60614) is able to provide a rental copy by mail. *The Thing* exists in a number of versions, and it's best to check the listed running time before purchasing one.

Destination Moon and *Invaders from Mars* are available from the Nostalgia Merchant (Media Home Entertainment, 2730 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 500, Santa Monica CA 90403). The color in both films is crisp, and the prints are extremely clear.

Some of the LaserDisc versions of SF films, notably *Forbidden Planet*, carry the four channels of stereo. I used a Shure Surround decoder on many of these epics, and the effect was quite vivid. But the one film to own in a LaserDisc version is Criterion's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. It's in the wide-screen format, with a crisp black and white, and there's a sometimes insightful narration available on one of the sound channels (if you wish to listen). It's a great way to watch the film. The disc also features a theatrical trailer for the film, a selection of stills, and an interview with the director, Don Siegel.

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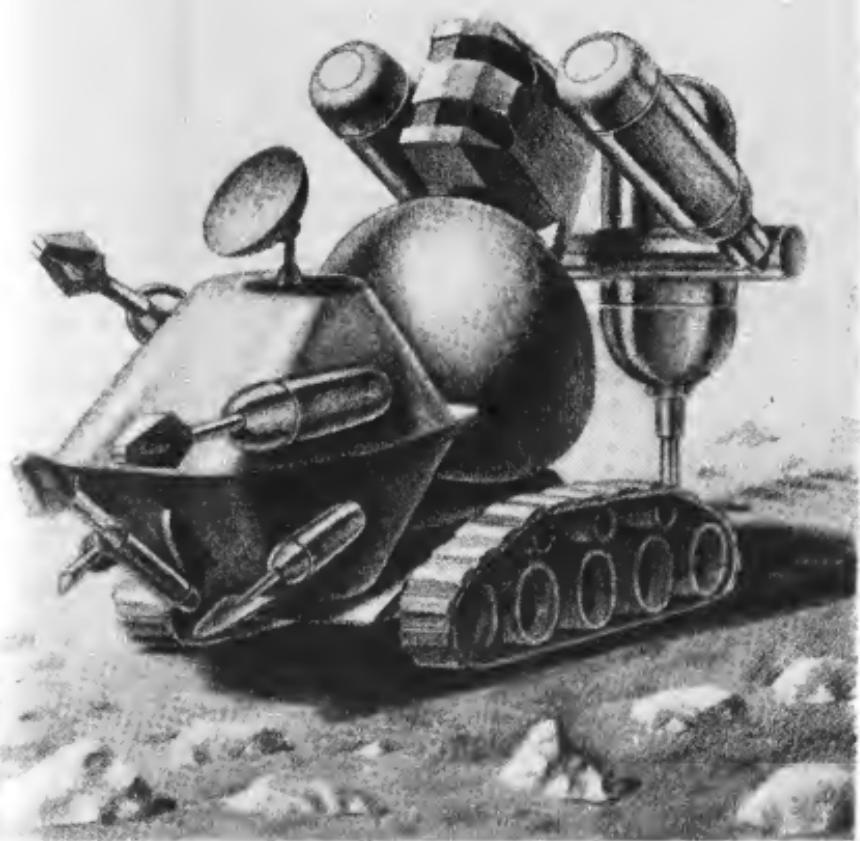


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TRANSCENDENCE
Paul J. McAuley
art: Terry Lee



The author has a doctorate in botany, and he holds a Bachelor of Science in botany and zoology. He currently works as a cell biologist at Oxford University.

Besides being a regular contributor to Amazing® Stories, he has also sold short fiction to Interzone, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.

The little death, the black instant when his mind was neither in his body nor in the Bronovski circuits of the surveyor, passed. Like a hand pushing into a glove, as a man rushes incontinently into his lover's embrace, Lucian Singer entered into full link. Hell poured into his senses.

He checked that the machine's coating nozzles were flowing, and executed a 360-degree scan to orientate himself. Silicon crystal-forms, sprung from seed matrices in the friable soil, shattered under his treads. No more alive than viruses, they grew, or so Singer believed, in response to the fluorosilicones shed by the surveyor. Lines of them marked eroding tracks in the floor of the sinuous fault valley. On either side, slopes littered with shattered rocks of all sizes bellied up, distorted by the jelly-like air. Other senses informed Singer that the cloud base was at 48 kilometers, that the temperature here in the highlands of Ishtar Terra was 710 degrees Kelvin, and that the wind was gusting to 80 kilometers an hour: comparatively, a mild spring zephyr. Through the dull red murk above, lightning flickered in constant delicate filigrees, and the sun was a belt of faint light that girdled the horizon, concentrated in one place like a bleary eye.

Lucian Singer unfolded his extensors. It was time to begin work, for all the rescue mission had inserted itself in orbit and was closing on his station. He was determined to prove that he was as good as the new operator, the cyborg brain-in-a-box. *Better*. This was his world.

He'd been working a low cliff for two weeks now, following thin fossiliferous seams of shale a centimeter at a time, visual sensors popping in and out of full magnification so as not to miss anything. Once exposed, the fossils corroded quickly, and he worked in a continual mist of the same short-chain fluorosilicones that coated and protected the surveyor. Even so, the little, delicate spirals and cones and ridged rods lasted no more than a few minutes, and he flipped each into the analyser port for holography, which spat it out even as he was prying away another crumbling layer.

The surveyor was tireless; Singer's mind was not. Every half-hour he retracted the extensors and moved back, treads gripping flaking shards. It was during one of these breaks, every sense drinking in the world he had come to love in his exile, that he saw a line of violet light scratch across the louring sky. Ionization track! Pushing his optical sensors to their extreme limit, he glimpsed a sphere wrapped in glowing plasma, lost it in the warp-

ing air. Then it was overhead, the heat shield tumbling away from a broad-based delivery capsule as a huge silver parachute blossomed above. Singer tracked it until it vanished. Theoretically, the same trick of refraction that distorted and fixed the sun should have made any part of the planet visible, a bowl rising to infinity. In fact, light scattering in the dense atmosphere limited vision to less than half a dozen kilometers. But the surveyor's computer had plotted enough of the trajectory to be able to calculate the approximate place of impact: less than twenty kilometers to the east, out on the lava plain.

Raped, Singer thought angrily, and initiated the procedure that would send his mind back into his body. Amid a rising black hum, Venus vanished.

After the accident that had killed Singer's two companions and stranded him, it had taken two years to put a rescue mission together, and another six months, following a long, slow, energy-conservative Hohmann orbit, for the ship to reach Venus. After so long, Singer had become accustomed to solitude, and despite Alice Rackham's pep talks and, latterly, the brief conversations with his rescuers (he had once trained for a year with the commander, Bobby Sarowitz, but that mission had been scrubbed), the thought of other people in orbit around Venus was as distasteful and strange as contemplating a wife's infidelity. As for someone else working on the surface . . . in the end, he'd taken to switching off whenever Rackham raised the subject, and by and by she'd taken the hint.

But although celestial mechanisms grind slowly, their consequences are inevitable. The rescue mission had neatly inserted into orbit two days ago, and in one more they would rendezvous with Singer's ramshackle station. He had assumed that they would wait before sending the cyborg's machine down, but had never talked about it with them; hence his sense of outraged betrayal when he had seen the ionization track.

Blackness, as the analogue of the electrical and chemical flux of his mind was played back into his brain and new memories transcribed. And then the little constellations of telltales above the couch that cradled his body and kept its autonomic functions ticking while he was downlink. Singer pushed back his dreadlocked hair and unhooked the big master cable from the socket at the back of his neck, punched the buckle release, and with an economical push of his wasted legs arrowed neatly through the hatch into the communications shack.

It took several minutes for his signal to reach Earth, several more for the JPL computers to hunt down Dr. Alice Rackham. Singer sipped orange juice from a squeeze bag, the cold righteous anger of the slighted, the unjustly wounded, building like a static charge in his head. When the screen finally cleared, he said without preliminaries, "You didn't tell me that she was going down to the surface today. You didn't tell me that she would be trespassing right on my doorstep. That's my area, at least! I've explored it

over and over; there's nothing left for her to discover."

Rackham was lounging on a couch in her yard, her face half-hidden by sunglasses. During the lag while Singer's accusations crawled at light speed to Earth, were channeled through the JPL net, and Rackham's reply came crawling back, each watched the other steadfastly, a polite convention that had solidified into habit. Rackham's glittering mask was unsettling, insectile, giving nothing away. Finally, she said, "We chose that area of Ishtar Terra precisely because you *have* explored it. You should look at your files more often, Lucian: they contain a full update. Lord knows you won't talk to me about it."

It was true, but he wouldn't admit it. And he hadn't looked at his files because, ever since the rescue mission had left Earth orbit, they had been filled to overflowing: appeals from UFO cultists to expose the "official lie" that Venus was a superheated hell, jargon-riddled letters from space freaks, political appeals, a list of projects in need of an advertising figurehead, someone wanting to do a biography. . . . He couldn't be bothered to wade through all the kipple to find the updates.

"Anyway," Rackham went on, "you don't own Venus. No one does."

"Tell her to keep away from me," Singer said. Patiently waiting, he watched her and the ordinary California day beyond. A green fountain reared into the unnaturally blue sky: an avocado tree. Spiralling lines of silver water droplets flung across the lush lawn by a sprinkler. A plane drew its contrail (violet line dragged through seething red cloud: raped) from left to right, like an artist's signature, before Rackham replied.

"You tell her, Singer. I'm your mission controller, not your psychiatrist. Pull yourself together, you'll be on coast-to-coast news in a day or so."

"Twenty-eight hours, fourteen minutes."

She smiled. "Well, you're on top of *that*, anyway. How are you feeling, Lucian?"

"Nervous as hell."

"Look on it as the first step of your journey back."

"I can never return to Earth, you know. My heart would give out."

The pause was longer than necessary for transmission. Eventually, Rackham said, "It's true you'll have to undergo . . . quarantine at Armstrong Station, but you'll get full medical coverage."

Singer had commissioned his own medical profile, knew well enough that the calcium leached from his bones, his enlarged heart and weakened arteries, and the dozens of different effects on his muscles couldn't all be reversed. He had been too long in zero gee, hadn't exercised as he should have. After rescue he could look forward to being, first, a medical curiosity, and second, a cripple.

He said, "Look, I have work to do, okay?" and switched off the transmitter. He heated a meal and took it to a port, raised the blind, and squinted out at Venus while he ate. He was over the nightside now, nothing visible but

occasional scratching of lightning against the ashen light. But he watched for a long time before he went to his cubby and took a sleeping pill, sealed himself into his cocoon.

He always needed medication to sleep, and despite his years in zero gravity, his dreams were still filled with the sensations of flight or falling. He dreamed of the accident that had killed both his crewmates, but this time he was in the command module, alone, feeling the thrust tremble as the main engine malf'd, the ship tumbling uncontrollably, a routine mission to dump mapping satellites turned into nightmare. It had taken a week for the orbit to decay, and Singer, in the science and life-system package, had been unable to do anything to help. He dreamed now that he was falling through smog-colored clouds, pressure closing on him like a giant hand, acid and heat searing his lungs, and woke up shivering, a halo of sweat around his splayed dreadlocks, unable to remember anything of the dream but its terror. It was the day the rescue mission made its rendezvous with his station. It was time to start work again.

The crushed disc of the sun hung where it always hung; as always, whips of lightning flickered ceaselessly in the industrial light. Singer could hear their static across the broadband, a constant scratching pulse as if the planet were trying to speak to him. He activated all his systems, and the surveyor rolled forward, treads crushing the little colonies of crystals that had sprung up around it. And stopped.

A long series of numbers had been scratched into the cliff.

Although they were already eroding in the hot, acid atmosphere, they were still legible, and Singer recognized at once what they were: a loran grid reference. He called it up, saw that it was only a few kilometers down slope, at the edge of the small, recently extinct caldera. Let her stay there, he thought, but after he started work, chipping out fossils and holographing them and spitting them out, the thought nagged at him. As if she were broadcasting a low-level signal, an itch in the analogue of his mind.

He backed away, shovelled loose rock into the intake where the components for the protective coating would be extracted. And thought, why not? Why not see her? Make it clear that she was to stay away from him. Strike a bargain, down here where they couldn't be overheard.

The valley widened to a vast boulder field that, although it actually sloped down, always seemed to rise all around because of the refraction, as if he were a ball bearing in a cup. Here and there clusters of crystal glinted — blood garnets, dirty rubies — amongst the rubble. Some of the boulders were bigger than the surveyor; a few were as large as the station where his untenantied body lay. As he rounded one of these, he saw the intruder no more than a couple of hundred meters away, her outline softened by rippling waves of heat.

He called out on broadband, and she responded at once, a tickling voice

that seemed to speak from his center.

"Colonel Singer, I presume?"

"Dr. McCullough."

"Dianne, please. Isn't this an incredible place?"

Her effusiveness surprised him.

Her surveyor was a little bigger than his, its snout bristling with attachments, the drill probe at its tail sunk in the ground. A beetle, he thought, an ovipositing beetle. And he a slightly smaller member of the same species, a tentative suitor. If she was at all unused to the climate of hell, she showed no sign.

"I'm just finishing a core for some UCLA geologists," she said. "A chore, I should say, but I have to pay some price to be here. This is such a — Well, of course you know all that. Listen, I wasn't going to visit you, but once I was down, it seemed the right thing to do. I hope it was. It must be strange to have someone down here. After so long."

"Strange, yes." He was scornful of her enthusiasm, but also afraid of it. When he'd spoken to her before, while the rescue mission was still a million kilometers out, she had struck him as cold, remote, indifferent. Brain-in-a-box. But she was no longer there, trapped. She was *here*.

She said, "I think that what they want to do is a damn shame. I don't ever want to leave. There's so much to explore: a whole world. I thought that over and over on the trip out. I'm only just beginning to realise what it means."

"Most of it is flat, stony desert," he said. "This area is atypical."

She raised her drill probe and began to feed the core into a slot in her glistening body with a smooth, almost lascivious motion. "It seems to me . . . everything is strange, every boulder. I could spend the rest of my life examining the boulders, it seems." Her laugh was like a raster of static. "I'm sorry, I'm running away with excitement. But after all this time, the freedom . . . Not being told what to do. Not being monitored all the time. Solitude. It's bliss."

"Listen, Dianne, I came to say that I would be happy for you to stay away from the area I'm working. At least allow me that."

"Why are you still studying those fossils? I read some of your work. You seem, well, obsessed."

"I do? You don't think they are important? For one thing, they prove how common life may be."

"But they are all gone now; billions of years ago, when the sun finished its development and the greenhouse effect ran away, the oceans evaporated and everything died here. It's all history, they can't come back. You look at those and not the crystals?"

"The crystals are not alive."

"Some people say that they are. They grow and reproduce."

"They are simply a product of the special conditions here. Or has there been new work I don't know about?"

"All those arguments confuse me. They seem alive to me."

"Come on," he said, openly mocking.

"I can feel it. In the crater to the east there are millions of them. You can hear them singing."

"Millions? There were only a few when I surveyed this place."

"I'll show you," she said, and neatly swivelled, turning within her length. Singer followed, his treads printing lines parallel to the tracks Dianne McCullough left on the baked ground. As they travelled, she kept up a ceaseless chatter, but Singer, uneasily feeling the first prickling of betrayal, said very little. They were replacing him with this untried, untested woman? She wasn't even a scientist: before her accident, she said, she had been a diving engineer. True, she handled the surveyor well enough. He admitted this grudgingly, knowing that already she was as adept as he. As if the low-slung machine were her natural body instead of a tool. Once, she ran it in a little dance while she was waiting for him to catch up, waving probes and extensors in exultation while lightning crackled through the murk above.

"I can hear them already," she said, "can't you?"

He went along with the game and asked for the frequency, but even at maximum amplitude he caught only a faint chirring that could have been static from some storm on the other side of the planet, botched by discharges of nearer lightning. Ahead he could see the rim of the caldera. Although only recently extinct, its sides had already eroded to a broad flat-topped bank that seemed to warp upward to the right and left.

"Oh, be careful, please be careful," Dianne McCullough said. "You're running right through them."

There were not many at first: unfaceted, not really crystalline, more like melted lumps of quartz. But when they gained the top of the bank, he saw that the slopes of the caldera were covered with them, newly grown singletons glittering amongst pebbly accretions of older formations, low spires and twisted towers stretching away into the sullen distances.

"I haven't been here for two years," he said. "There must have been a change in the wind pattern, bringing precipitate in from the active volcanoes." He gestured southward with several limbs, at the point where, at the fading edge of visibility, tipped sideways by refraction, low distorted cones sat amongst whorled lava fields.

"When I was resting," she said, "some formed around me, small ones no bigger than my thumbnail. When I had a thumbnail."

"It's the protective coating. They seed in it like paramecia in a hay infusion."

"I think they're singing some incredibly complicated song. Did you ever hear whales singing? The same song, the same story, lasts for hours."

But the chirring was as faint as ever. All around, hell simmered.

"I never want to leave," she said.

"The surveyor won't last more than a dozen years."

"They'll be sending me another one at the next window, and perhaps a remote to explore the upper atmosphere. There's so much to explore."

"You're staying here? The expedition is staying here?"

"They'll leave all that remains of me in orbit. But I'm not going back to it. You made the first step; I'm going a little way beyond."

"Damn Rackham!" Angrily, he began to disconnect even as Dianne McCullough began to speak again. Her voice faded, and he swam through an instant of blackness to his feeble body, felt it shudder on the couch. But when he opened his eyes, he saw a shadow eclipsing the constellations of telltales, a man regarding him steadfastly.

"Hold still, Singer," the intruder said. It was Bobby Sarowitz, commander of the rescue mission. "Hold still now. Man, how did you ever get to looking so bad?"

The next few hours passed in an uncomfortable mêlée, confusing and exhausting Singer. He felt himself at a remove from his rescuers, even as they spent two hours cutting away his tangled dreadlocks and washing the remaining hair, trimming his beard, preparing him for the staged confrontation that would go out across the networks: the handshakes across the tunnel that joined Singer's station to their ship, the smiles, the backslapping, and even cigars, which left a raw taste in Singer's mouth and which were doused as soon as the cameras were switched off and mission control had given its opinion that it had been a great show.

Afterward, the two intruders were reservedly polite toward Singer, neither quite sure what to make of him. Bobby Sarowitz shook his head over the variety of gimcrack techniques Singer used to keep the station running, while the science specialist, a young man named Lawrence Donnell whose skin was several degrees blacker than Singer's, seemed a little in awe: as if Singer were some relic from the past, a combination of John Glenn, Chuck Yeager, and Neil Armstrong. Both annoyed Singer, Sarowitz's professional cynicism, Donnell's respectful sidelong glances. But what annoyed him most was the continual presence of their meaty, clumsy bodies: both assiduously exercised in a centrifugal segment of their ship at the beginning and end of each working day. *They* would not be cripples when they returned.

Singer stayed in the station, in his own territory, and after a while the others began to leave him alone. Almost the first thing Sarowitz had done was pull the control key of the link. And wouldn't return it, no matter how much Singer argued that he had to finish his research, that he could be of help to McCullough. He complained to Rackham about this further betrayal, but she simply said, "That's the way things have to be, Lucian. You've got to accept that you're coming back."

"You're treating me like some sort of addict, making me do cold turkey."

"Just cooperate with Sarowitz and Donnell. They have a lot of work to fit in before departure. Why don't you help them?"

"The best thing I can do is keep out of their way, which is what I'm doing." It occurred to Singer that the plug would remain pulled until the rescue mission departed, just in case he decided to stay or take refuge on the surface in the surveyor. He said, "I'm not going to pull any stunts. I'm no cyborg. I have to keep coming back or I'd lose memory when I was retranscribed."

"I'm sorry, Lucian. I have my orders."

And so did Sarowitz and Donnell. No amount of sweet-talking could convince them of the necessity of using the link. As his initial politeness faded, Sarowitz barely hid his contempt at Singer's plight. He could understand the rebellion — most astronauts are in a continual state of foment against the armchair fliers of mission control — but he was of the old school, had come up through the Navy, and believed that you made your own luck. And besides, he despised the way Singer had let his body go. Donnell was more sympathetic, but he had his own problems.

"She hardly talks to me anymore, keeps going off on Mickey-Mouse trips of her own," Donnell complained.

"She's enjoying herself down there," Singer replied. He tried to imagine what it would be like to be let out of the bottle. After the elective surgery, all that was left of her crippled body was her brain and a coil of spinal cord, a few glands, her heart, and a pared-down blood system. Everything else, all that made her human, had been flensed away. Her blood was a synthetic compound oxygenated by a cascade filter, a dialyser swept out the wastes and balanced her electrolytes, and her nerves were connected to computer interfaces.

"She keeps going on about the crystals, like an *idée fixe*, you know. An obsession. Mission control reckons that she's still within parameters, and she does all her scheduled tasks, but she won't talk, hardly."

"So when she comes up here, hold her awhile. Like you're holding me."

"Hell, she doesn't have to come up." Donnell tugged at his neat, pointed beard. "That's the way it's designed."

Singer pressed for an explanation, and Donnell told him that Dianne McCullough's incoming memory was skimmed each day and transmitted to the cyborg, read into the chemical balances of the cells of her untenanted brain. "The problem is that it doesn't work from our end. She doesn't have to come up, and I can't make her."

"So let me go down, let me see what I can do. It sounds like she needs a touch of reality, that's all."

Donnell shrugged, the gesture turning him slightly. "It would be neat, but I just can't do it. Stay with it, Singer. You'll be getting a hero's welcome back on Earth. There's all kinds of interest in you again."

Singer knew: his files were jammed with appeals from networks for interviews, all of which he'd ignored. He said, "On Earth I'll be lucky to get about in a wheelchair, if I survive the trip down. No, I'll be stuck on Arm-

strong."

"Maybe they can do for you what they did to McCullough."

"I'm an operator. I've no desire to be a machine for the rest of my life."

"Yeah. She told me, you know, that I was redundant, that she was the next stage in evolution. One thing you could do is maybe talk to her from here. You've been down there, so maybe she'd talk back. You'd be an anchor. You don't have to go down to give her a touch of reality."

"It's real down there, too," Singer said softly. He was ambivalent about the idea, and even after Donnell had obtained clearance, he put off calling McCullough for a couple of days. It was a link with the harsh landscape of his love, true . . . and it would also remind him of what he had lost. But in the end, desire won out.

"I'm glad to hear you again," Dianne McCullough's voice said. It was botched by rasters of static, seemed light-years away. In the communications shack of his station, Singer closed his eyes and imagined the simmering, sullen desert, ached for it. He asked how things were.

"Good. I'm still around the crater."

"You still believe those crystals are worth looking at? It's all been done before."

"The chemistry isn't everything."

"What else have you found?"

"Did you ever notice the way they all interconnect? I can almost understand it. But not quite, not yet."

"I wish I could be there."

"I don't mind being alone. Would you ever leave your body for good?"

"No, I don't think so."

"That's the difference between us," she said, and cut contact.

Still, Singer had been more successful at drawing her out than Donnell, or so Donnell said. He had other conversations with her, and always she was vague and distracted and abrupt, so different from when he had talked with her on the surface. He found that he drew her out most by talking about the crystals. She had the idea that they were linked all the way around the planet, that they might even keep the atmosphere the way it was, so that they grew in optimal conditions.

He laughed. "That's teleology. If the atmosphere wasn't the way it was, they wouldn't be there anyway. They need heat and acidic conditions and great pressure, lots of electrical activity, free fluorine and so on. Without any one of those, they wouldn't be there."

Laughing at her ideas was a mistake — she withdrew, cut contact. Another time he asked, "Do you miss people?"

"I always was a loner, you know. That was partly why I became a diver. Used to spend months at a time tending the mining machines. Under pressure like here, but darker of course, and so much colder." She had worked in the Pacific mines until she had come up too quickly one day and a nitrogen

bubble had formed in the artery supplying her spinal cord. After that she had been a quadriplegic until she volunteered for the cyborg program.

She asked how he took to having company again. "Those two annoyed me, you know. They don't know they're redundant, meat machines."

"I guess I'm one, too."

Her laughter was unnerving, like fingernails scratching tin. "You're an amphibian, Singer, a lungfish. I can tolerate you."

She meant it; she wasn't talking to Donnell at all, and was falling farther and farther behind with her scheduled tasks. Even Sarowitz was becoming worried; the Jupiter mission he and Singer had once trained for had been revived, and he had a chance at it if this one went well. More than once, Singer tried to use Dianne McCullough's non-cooperation as a lever for getting back down, but to no avail.

"Christ, Singer, you know I can't let you." Donnell pulled at his beard. "Orders, right?"

"Well, of course." Singer knew with heavy certainty that he was barred forever, and thought of his surveyor, its autonomic programs running down, its casing eroding. . . . The next time he talked to Dianne he asked about his machine.

"It's okay," she said after a pause.

"The maintenance programs are running, then."

"I suppose so," she said, and changed the subject.

And so it went, until the flare.

Singer was working on a blocked pipe in the garden. It wasn't necessary now, but he kept the station's systems going out of pride. Cobbled together from the life-system and science package of the original mission and half a dozen resupply canisters sent to him after the disaster, it was *his* place — some of the access tunnels were too narrow for Sarowitz or Donnell to maneuver their bulky bodies, and there was little of the neat order, defining spurious directions of up and down, shown in their ship.

He had just wrested a filthy clot of *Spirella* from the pipe when the signal bell rang. He ignored it, carefully vacuuming floating globules of algae-tinted water, refitted the pipe. He was fastening the last seal when Sarowitz caromed into the long, sunlit space.

He said, "There's a flare on the way. You better come to the shelter."

"You know, I've already received enough radiation in the normal course of things to make me sterile." Singer carefully tightened the seal, switched on the pump. The tube shuddered under his hand as green water pulsed through.

"For Christ's sake," Sarowitz said, "we're already getting the first particles. Donnell is buttoned up. Now come on." He grabbed Singer's arm, his fingers meeting his thumb around the wasted biceps.

Glaring, Singer shook off the grip. "I'm not an invalid. Not here."

"Then come on," Sarowitz said, embarrassed, and turned to go.

After a moment, Singer followed him.

They spent two weeks in the cramped shelter while the radiation of the flare sleeted through the rescue ship and Singer's station. It was only a minor flare and would hardly disturb radio communications on Earth — although it knocked out spacecraft communications, which were not shielded by magnetosphere and atmosphere — but to be out in it for more than a couple of hours would be to receive a lethal dose. Donnell, fretting about the science program, said that he was beginning to think that Dianne McCullough was right: space was a place for machines, not people.

Sarowitz sneered. "Survival is an engineering problem. They've developed new shields for the Jupiter mission, and when they're fitted to all spacecraft, we won't have to sit in a lead coffin whenever the sun hiccoughs."

"He has a point, though," Singer said.

"You're falling in love with that cyborg, man," Sarowitz said, good-humoredly.

"Come on," Singer said, uncomfortably. And wondered what she was doing at that moment.

In the meantime, he found that Donnell played a passable game of chess, and they held tournament after tournament while Sarowitz watched the old flat films for which he had a passion ("That Kathleen Turner, man. She's all I need on a mission like this!") or read technical manuals, reviewing his tensor calculus. Two weeks. And when the storm finally died, there were only five days until the mission was due to depart.

Once it was safe to leave the shelter, the first thing that Donnell did was to activate the radio link with the surveyor. Singer hung at his shoulder while Donnell fine-tuned, changed to another channel, and tried over. At last he flipped off the power in exasperation and silently began to pluck off the access plates and check the circuits. Singer watched with a kind of numb anticipation, knowing that there would be nothing wrong with the radio.

There wasn't.

Sarowitz, hung upside down in the hatch, said, "Want I should suit up and check the antennae? They could have been fritzed by the flare."

Donnell turned from the link panel. "There'll be no need," he said quietly. "She turned off the update link a couple of days after the flare began; I guess that's when she turned the radio off, too."

"Christ," Singer said. Without the link, Dianne's uninhabited brain would receive no memory updating, and she'd been down there too long now; if she returned, she would lose memory, in patches, holes.

This had to be explained to Sarowitz, who simply said, "I still think I should check the antennae." And suited up, went out, came back two hours later, shrugging wearily. There was nothing wrong with the antennae either.

"You'll have to let me go down," Singer said. "That's the only way we can

find out what she's doing."

"And risk losing you?" Sarowitz asked bluntly.

"Come on," Donnell said, "Lucian has a point." Behind him, green water pulsed through tubes as thick as his waist; they had gathered in the garden of Singer's station, the largest open space in the conglomerate structure. Blades of sunlight lanced through the air from between the shutters of the curving, closed blinds.

Sarowitz glanced back through the hatch where he hung. Arms folded, toes of one bare foot holding him in place, he swayed in air currents like a huge bat. His glance took in the red-lit couch and console of Singer's downlink, partly visible beyond the communications shack. Clearly, he was wondering if Singer was going to pull some trick.

So Singer said, "I'm coming back. I'm not like McCullough. I couldn't live in a machine."

"Suppose there is something down there, something about those crystals she was always babbling about?" Sarowitz glared at Singer, at Donnell.

Donnell said, "When you're down, I'll load a parasitic program into your dump memory. If you get that into the system of *her* surveyor, it'll activate the retrieval system. We'll get her back, even if she is partially amnesiac."

"Hell," Sarowitz said, "can't you load that into her from here?"

Donnell shrugged, caught at a handhold to steady himself. As always, Singer watched these clumsy twitches of overdeveloped muscles with distaste. He hung quietly in midair, warm sunlight splashing one hip.

"Well?" Sarowitz demanded.

"I can't broadcast it without knowing precisely where she is. Too much atmospheric interference to do it otherwise. She'd only get part of it. Singer can push it right into her."

"Call up Rackham," Singer suggested.

"Hell no," Sarowitz said. "We can deal with this ourselves."

Singer tried not to smile. He had guessed that Sarowitz would not defer to higher authority. It would go against the code, it would rupture his cool. You didn't look for help to get your ass out of the crack — you did it yourself or died trying.

Donnell pointed out, "We don't have much choice, Bobby. Either wait for Dianne to call in, until it's too late to do anything, or send Lucian down."

"Don't push so hard," Sarowitz said, scowling. But he speared two fingers into the breast pocket of his coveralls and fished out the master key to Singer's link. He flicked it down the length of the garden, a tiny precious fish flashing silver through spaced blades of sunlight. As Singer plucked it out of the air, he added, "And don't you *mess* up."

"Come on," Singer said, grinning. "I *know* Venus."

The stretching moment of blackness . . . then sweet rushing fulfillment. Immediately, Singer began to scan the distorted landscape and realised with

a shock that the surveyor was nowhere near where he had so precipitately abandoned it, at the edge of the caldera. He checked the loran grid, found that he was some five kilometers south. How had he — or rather, the surveyor — ended up there? Left to itself, the machine possessed only the skimpiest maintenance functions, little more than shovelling up rock, available anywhere, and processing it into the protective coat of fluorosilicones.

He swivelled again, failing to see Dianne's machine. Crystals shattered under his treads. They were on the surveyor as well, clustering thickly around the antennae, and he reached back with a fine manipulator and brushed them off. Perhaps the surveyor had moved away from the thickly seeded caldera simply to prevent itself from being overgrown, he thought, feeling relieved at being able to rationalise the mystery.

He called up the station, and Donnell answered and fed the program to him. "How is it down there? Any sign of her?"

"Not yet. Switch off, now. She may spook if she finds I'm in contact."

"Okay," Donnell said reluctantly, and Singer was alone. Or, not quite. As he moved off, scanning radio frequencies and failing to raise Dianne on any of them, he felt a faint cold touch, an alien presence within the circuits where his mind nestled, a ghost in the machine.

But he shook off the feeling as he travelled, revelling in the power of the surveyor, his body, as it rolled across the ground, shards collapsing crisply under his treads as lightning scratched and scratched in the murk above, his twenty senses registering everything around him in the furnace light.

He'd taken speed a few times when he was a teenager, and being the machine was like that high: every sense sharp yet his limbs lightly sheathed, swaddled. Exultant, Singer rolled on, eagerly scanning all around him for any trace of Dianne Lee McCullough.

He found her on radar ten minutes before he picked her up visually, a glittering speck on the seeming rise before him, the caldera gleaming beyond. All around, the ground was crisscrossed with fading tracks, each limned by lines and strings of tiny crystals. The surveyor stood at the center of this mandala, a glistening armored beetle bristling with drills and probes, spurs and spires of crystal around the antennae and sensory turret like surrealistic crowns.

"Dianne?"

There was no reply. He circled the surveyor, baffled. From the growth of the crystals, he estimated that the newest tracks had been made at least five days ago, but the growths on her surveyor were at least twice as old. Still something nagged at his mind, a tickling residue. He scanned all channels again, and on impulse settled on the one where she had demonstrated the chirring she had claimed to be the voice of the crystals. The chirring was still there. And, after a while, a faint call.

Singer?

"Dianne! Dianne, what's wrong?"

Abruptly, her surveyor jerked into life and began to back away, drill probe raised like a scorpion's sting. He followed slowly, but she put on speed, bumping up the slopes of pitted lava. Behind her, the caldera was a tipped bowl carpeted with spines and spires and twisted outcrops of crystal: an Ernst painting viewed through a dark distorted glass.

"Singer. So you came back."

Her voice didn't seem to come through the radio, but vibrated within the circuits that contained his mind like an echo in the vault of his skull.

"Why did you cut contact? Is something broken?"

"I don't need the meat anymore."

"You sound very sure. What are you going to be instead, part of the landscape?" When she didn't reply, he said, "I mean the crystals growing on you." He was relaxed and confident, the parasitic program in his dump memory a shaft with which he could pierce her at any time, pin her down, and send her back.

"The crystals help me see."

"See what, Dianne?"

"I'll show you," she said, "but it would have been easier if you hadn't knocked off the crystals on your antennae."

"I don't —"

"Wait," she said, and suddenly the faint alien presence became real, as if a person were standing just behind him. Some sort of override, he realised, even as its grip tightened. A mist seemed to thicken all around, clouding every sense. He floated within it without panic — for panic is a glandular reaction, and his mind was cut free of his glands; cut free, it seemed, of everything — but with increasing fear. What had she done to him? Where was she?

"Over here," Dianne Lee McCullough said, and her voice candled a white vision of a woman sitting on a rock. For a moment Singer thought he saw fairy wings glistening on her back. "My joke," she said, and vanished like a pricked soap bubble. "I'm sorry, this is difficult to maintain. You really shouldn't have knocked off those crystals. They help the link."

"You put some program or other into my machine, didn't you? Was it you who moved it?"

He saw a great flat plain now, stretching under a darkling sky dominated by a patchwork ball that he realised was the sun seen by radio light. Sparkling loops and curves, the magnetic lines that channelled prominences, wove a delicate filigree around it. The rest of the sky was faintly white, the residual microwave radiation of the explosion that had begun creation, and stars hung against it like ragged blooms. Here and there, small and clear, were the curdled spirals of radio galaxies.

He said, "What are you trying to tell me, Dianne?"

"This is how the crystals see the universe. The crater is like the bowl of a radio telescope. With others it forms a base line as big as the planet. Every

node of crystals is part of a greater intelligence: call it Cytheria, if you like. This place is like a room in it. In one way, it's a library; in another, a consensus space."

Without form, a dimensionless viewpoint, Singer considered. Somehow she had cut free of reality, worked out this hallucination or fugue, had imprinted it on his machine. And then he thought of the crystals growing on her surveyor, and on his: why had they clustered around the antennae when every part of the machine was covered in fluorosilicones?

She said, "Your machine began to move around after you left, once enough crystals had grown on it. They showed me how to get here."

"Can't they talk to me?"

"You're just a lungfish, Singer. You've gone as far as you can by yourself. You understand a little more than the meat machines, but only a little. I want you to learn, to think what we can do! I think that there may be other viewpoints living in Cytheria, astronauts sent out as radio packages from other civilizations, sent the way your mind is sent into the Bronovski circuits, the way you become the surveyor."

He could feel the limits of the override now, a subliminal image of printed circuitry beneath the glowing radio sky. Searching for the point where it connected with his sensorium, he said, "Suppose you're wrong, Dianne? Suppose you've marooned yourself down here because of a delusion?"

She ignored this. "We've transcended the need for physical bodies. We don't have to rely on them, or on machines, to support our minds."

And then he had it. For a moment the circuitry gridded his vision, and then it all faded. Hell rose again in his senses, the warped bowl of the caldera, Dianne's surveyor facing his in the simmering murk.

She began to back away again. "You fought against it. How can I make you understand?"

"You wanted to share it, Dianne. That's only human." He couldn't say that it wasn't real. "It isn't a place for humans, Dianne. It's too far out. Exploration means nothing unless you can return, unless you can share what you've found with other people. To be human is to, well, to need other humans."

"Ever since my accident, until the cyborg program, I was stuck in a broken meat machine. Do you understand what it was like? Nothing but helplessness, dependency on other people or on machines, nothing felt toward me but pity. That's what being human meant to me."

He understood.

"That's what it will be like for you, if you go back. Here, you can be free."

"Until my surveyor breaks down."

"I told you that I've gone beyond the need for that," she said. "I can live in the consensus space." She was a very long way off now, distorted by rippling heat. When he made to follow, she wheeled around, moving away more quickly. "Don't follow. Go back. Tell them that my machine broke

down, that I'm dead. Go on, lungfish, go back to the sea!"

She was still in range of his transmitter, of course, but he didn't use the program against her. Not out of pity or sympathy, but because he knew that what she said was true. He watched until she was out of sight, then cut the link.

And a moment later was beyond the black instant of reconstitution, and lived again.

Donnell swam through the hatch and caught the edge of Singer's couch. "Did you find her? Is she still alive?"

Catching the other's hand, Singer shook his head.

It was not difficult to maintain the lie; after all, he was the only one who could disprove it. He went downlink several times more, to complete the scientific program as best he could. Although he searched for it in the little free time he had, he saw no sign of Dianne's surveyor, but sometimes felt an otherness, a presence in the furnace landscape. On his last trip he went to the edge of the eroded caldera and tried to hear the voice of the crystals, of Cytheria, but the faint chirring could have been anything, or nothing. Still, he left the surveyor on the rim, where she could find it if she needed it.

During the long slow swing back to Earth, Singer began to exercise in the centrifuge. Donnell tested Singer after each session to make sure he wasn't overdoing it, and after Singer had finally managed to run three times around the centrifuge torus at half a gee, Donnell asked him if he thought he would ever be fit enough to return to Earth.

"No, of course not. According to my medical profile, things have gone too far for that. But there will be a maximum acceleration of half a gee on the Jupiter mission, at insertion. I'll have to be able to withstand that."

"You think they'll let you go on that?"

"Sure." Singer was confident about that, at least. Alice Rackham had called *him* up a week ago, to complain about the mail that was deluging her office. "If you have to stir it up," she had said, "do it with NASA. I work here, is all." And when Singer had promised to try: "You had better, mister! I'm knee-deep in it already!" Then she had softened. "Good luck, anyway. We're all rooting for you here."

Singer explained to Donnell, "I'm a hero, aren't I? Public opinion is on my side, and you know that NASA listens to the public. Besides, I'm the most experienced downlink operator they have. How can they refuse?" He tapped the picture of Jupiter that Sarowitz had fixed to the wall of the commons. "Bobby doesn't know it, but he's already gotten his first crewmember."

And three years later he was there, ready to descend into the banded world-ocean. He still thought about Dianne Lee McCullough and the debt he owed her. For owe her he did. In recoiling from her rejection of all that was human, he had been given the impetus that had, finally, brought him

here despite his handicap. One day, he knew, he would have to return to Venus. Although she had said that she had transcended her body, transcended her humanity, he wasn't so sure: for, in the hour of her rejection, hadn't she asked him to go with her? No human action is absolute, is pure. Only by our flaws are we redeemed. And suppose, he thought, suppose she had been right, suppose the crystals were alive, formed some sort of *gestalt*, reached out across the universe as Dianne had reached out to him?

Yes, he would go back, stand at the edge of the unknown, and call to her. And see if she would answer his siren song and tell him all that she had learned.



COMPUTER POETRY

I dreamed
Of circuitry,
Thread-thin wires sheathed in rainbow plastic,
Fiber-optics, microchips,
Floating in a software sea.

I dreamed
The multicolored electronic wires
Wrapped 'round my hand and traveled up my arm,
A technological parasitic vine.
Binding and suffocating me,
As I was transformed by technology.

I dreamed
My body was replaced with metal construct,
Microchip-controlled.
My poetry was warped into meaningless data,
A set of numbers and random symbols,
Fit only for trash.

I dreamed
I sat at my word processor,
Loading poems from a disk . . .

— Lori Selke

LAZARUS
by W. T. Quick
art: Hank Jankus

The author is 41 years old and is a midwestern transplant to the city of San Francisco. His stories have been published in Analog and Aboriginal SF. He recently sold a novel, Envaders of Flesh and Sand, to NAL; this book is the first of a technofantasy trilogy, and it was published in early 1988.

Carver checked his watch. Nine o'clock. They were coming to kill him at ten. He rolled over on his stomach and wondered if he could nap for a while. Maybe half an hour. That would give him plenty of time to get ready. He didn't really feel tired; he'd had enough rest. They hadn't killed him for almost a week.

He lay still for several minutes, his eyes closed, but it was no good, so he rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. How did the old song go? They're coming to take me away, ha ha, ho ho . . . Kid stuff. This was real.

Over the door of his room was an ancient safety mirror, tarnished the color of moth wings. It was tilted the wrong way now, slumped under its own weight and creaky joint, so that it faced his bed. He watched his reflection in the yellowed glass, studying the doll figure there. He saw a thin man with a young-old face. Do I look like *that*? he wondered, shocked. I'm only twenty-two . . . that face has *lines*. The amber film on the mirror fuzzed out his sharp blue eyes, washed them to a muddy brown. Big nose. High cheekbones. Thick curly brillo fuzz of dirty blond hair. Bony shoulders, skinny arms, sunken, shaved chest. And scars, of course, road-mapping that chest in a hundred livid paths.

So who looks good in a hospital? he asked the mirror figure silently. He lifted his right arm and wiggled his fingers, watching the tiny other-Carver do the same, a miniature return hello. Suddenly his stomach twisted. It was too much like dying, like floating gently above the corpse in the wavy yellow light, rising slowly, whispering, "That's me down there, bye bye, bye bye —"

He coughed and closed his eyes. Ten minutes left. There wasn't enough time in the whole world to get ready. Not for what they were going to do to him.

Simpson came first, as always, his big jolly fat man's face wrinkled up in a smile, cheeks puffed out, so that the flat black glaze of his stare was almost hidden behind slits of rosy flesh. Carver thought Simpson was a funny name. It should belong to a helpless, bumbling bank teller, or the next door neighbor who could never start his lawn mower. A man whose last name was

Simpson should be a Wally, too. Wally Simpson. But Carver didn't know Simpson's first name. All he knew was Major. Major Simpson. Maybe that *was* his first name.

Simpson always came first. Carver finally realized that Simpson needed to reassure himself, to see with his opaque dead eyes that Carver was still alive, still functioning. So he could kill him again.

Carver hated it when Simpson smiled at him. He bet Simpson had smiled that same smile in grade school after kicking the shit out of some little kid. Now I own you, that smile said.

"Carver, how're you doing? Everything okay?" Simpson boomed. He had a deep, friendly voice. Just goes to show, Carver thought. If I didn't have to look at him, maybe I'd believe him a little better.

"Fine, Major," Carver said. "I feel good today."

"Excellent," Simpson replied. Then he rubbed his pudgy palms together. Washing his hands of me? Carver wondered. Or getting ready to eat?

"Uh, Major, you promised me," Carver said.

Those flat eyes shifted minutely. "Promised? Oh, right. I keep my promises, kid. One, maybe two more times. Then it's Hawaii for you. Beaches, sun, all the money you want . . . and *women*—" He licked his lips. "I wish I could go with you. Haven't had a vacation myself in a long time."

Oh, hell, Carver thought tiredly. They call it a hospital, but it's a jail. And I'm not going to Hawaii or anywhere else. I'm never leaving here. Not alive, anyway.

Not alive. What a joke that was.

A white cloud of doctors and nurses hustled into the room and carried him away. He was glad. He didn't have to think for a while. It was never a good idea to think too much while you were dead.

It was a simple process. Technologically, at least. A couple of decades before, there had been controversy about what were then called heroic measures. A fine name for wires and tubes and machines hooked up to some withered human husk. But the doctors loved it. It cost a *lot* of money to postpone nature's inevitable judgments.

Now, when they said they could keep you alive, they meant it. Even *bring you back*. Now you weren't dead until they buried you, and they staved that off almost indefinitely. At least until your insurance allotment went flat.

Carver caught a glimpse of Simpson's red face as the white phalanx of healers pushed his gurney through the doors of the operating room. The fat man was no longer smiling. His expression had congealed to a thick lard of worry.

Afraid I won't make it back this time, Carver thought. Well, maybe I won't. Heroic doesn't mean divine. Too bad. You'd have to find another meal ticket. And I bet you eat a *lot*.

Carver recognized what was happening inside his skull. His thoughts



seemed to turn curdled and whimsical as the time approached. Weird things raised their curious heads from the swamp of his unconscious and looked around. Odd visions fluttered, batting their blind wings against the underside of reality.

Down, guys, Carver thought. It's nothing. I'm just gonna die. Again.

They strapped him down and pasted the electrodes to his chest. He flinched as the IV needle penetrated, then relaxed as exotic painkillers giggled into his veins. The customary pink haze began to flood his eyesight. He wondered about the painkillers sometimes. Relax, boy, this won't hurt. It's only death. Really. We promise.

As his eyes finally closed, the volts surged through his chest and froze his heart like a six-car pileup on the bypass. The supervising medic looked up at Simpson.

"That's it," he said. "He's gone. Deader than my first wife's custody suit."

Simpson nodded. "Let's try for five minutes this time."

The doctor turned. The machines began to wheeze.

Carver felt a faint popping sensation, as if he'd burst through an invisible membrane, and he opened his eyes. He was somewhere near the ceiling of the operating room. He looked down and saw his body on the table below, surrounded by a small crowd of masked doctors and nurses.

Who was that masked man? he wondered.

Simpson was near the door, nodding his head and talking rapidly. The harsh lights of the operating room glinted off the shiny round patch of skin on the top of his head.

Hey, Carver thought, the bozo's going bald. I never noticed that before.

Now he began to melt into the ceiling of the room. A faint twinge of sadness rippled through him as he lost sight of his body. It began to grow dark. He knew his eyes were open, but there was nothing to see. Not in this place.

Finally, a dim light began to grow around him. His — upward? — movement slowed, until he hung suspended in what he'd come to think of as the overworld. He was no longer breathing, but that didn't bother him. Amazing what you could get used to, if you did it often enough.

Around him swirled vast, incandescent blue streamers. It was silent as a . . . tomb. He couldn't make out any horizon. Distance here did not seem to exist. He was always where he was, and he knew he could be wherever he wished to be. Directly overhead burned the Light.

With some effort, he ignored the great, beckoning beacon. It called to him still, but he'd learned to control the blind, rushing urge it tried to fill him with. His business wasn't there, although someday it would be.

He looked down and examined the floor of this strange world. From his vantage point it appeared to be an infinite, heaving sea of tiny silver bubbles. He moved himself down, ignoring the call of the Light. He knew that,

as far as the Light was concerned, he was heading in the wrong direction.

Eventually, he hovered just above the frothing surface of the bubble-ocean. Each bubble was about the size of his head. Their surfaces swirled with filmy rainbow colors, all the colors he'd ever seen, and some that perhaps only existed here. He sighed. It was time to get to work.

General Sergei Spetsnialkapoletski was almost completely unknown in the United States. Carver, unable to wrap his tongue around the endless Russian syllables, called him General SpecialKay — and knew him very well. Now he concentrated on the man, and felt himself shift — everything still looked the same, but he knew he was in a different place. General SpecialKay was near.

At the beginning, Simpson had told him the general was the head of the Soviet Special Rocket Forces. Which was supposed to be the reason for all this. Carver was no longer certain it was much of a reason, but he feared the call of the Light. So he did what he was told, and reached out. Images began to fill his mind. He didn't understand the language, the specific words, but he knew that Simpson would. Simpson practically slobbered as Carver spewed twisted Russian sounds like a berserk tape recorder. "Good stuff," he would say. "Anything else? Can you remember anything else he saw? Anything that he *heard*?" Once, Simpson told him it didn't matter what Carver brought back. Anything from the mind of the Russian was valuable, *anything*.

Valuable to whom? he wondered as he gorged himself on the thoughts of General SpecialKay. He was coming to know Simpson very well, too. It wasn't a comfortable feeling.

It was time to go back. The longer he stayed in this place, the stronger grew the frenzied, sucking summons of the Light. Now the urge to rise was almost unbearable. He was conscious of the Light beating silently down on him, demanding that he join it. The thought filled him with terror. He might be dead, but the Light was Death, and he wasn't ready for *that*. Not yet.

He disengaged himself from General SpecialKay and forced himself down into the darkness.

"What's the matter?" Major Simpson snarled. "Have you lost him?" He paused, his breath rasping. "Doc, if that man is really dead, you're not far behind."

"Shut up, Major," Doctor Webster muttered tensely. His long finger did something complicated to the electrodes attached to Carver's chest. "We'll bring the little sucker back." The lines of his face, however, had deepened into something very like knife work.

Little sucker? Carver thought. I wonder if these guys know I can hear everything they say?

He hovered just beneath the ceiling of the operating room. Now he could see the pulsing, nearly invisible silver thread that somehow connected him to the corpse on the operating table. He knew nobody else could see the thread. But then, nobody else was dead. And just as these people had an intellectual understanding of what he did, they did not know. So they said whatever they felt like because they really didn't believe in ghosts.

"Boo," he said softly, and let the silver line pull him home.

Carver dropped his head tiredly back on his pillow. Dying sure took a lot out of a man. Not to mention the three-hour session with Simpson. He never waited. He always followed Carver's gurney right back to his room, panting with eagerness to turn on his tape recorder and suck Carver dry of whatever gifts he'd brought from the Soviet mind of General SpecialKay.

This time the de-briefing had seemed unbearably long. Maybe, Carver thought, because I don't believe in it anymore. The lies Simpson had fed him at the beginning had faded and shriveled into exhausted gray rags, into a dull tapestry that once had somehow glimmered with hope.

He closed his eyes. How could he have believed him? But he understood. At the beginning, it had been easy. A man just returned from the dead will believe almost anything. And Simpson was a good liar.

He felt his thoughts begin to dissolve. He smiled softly, waiting. He needed rest. He needed sleep. He needed peace.

The dream was the same. It was so familiar that he fell right into it, even though he knew it was a dream.

February blew its damp, chill breath over the sleeping city of Chicago. Overhead a streetlight made electric popcorn sounds. Eddie stopped beneath it, his shadow a knife of darkness, and adjusted the straps of his heavy backpack. Carver knew the backpack was heavy because he'd loaded it. They couldn't get good stuff, so he'd used a home-brewed soap and fertilizer mix for the bomb. Almost thirty pounds of it. It was the best he could do because the Green Front was a poverty organization. It couldn't afford imported plastique, like the better-funded groups.

"Damn, this's a load," Eddie grunted.

"You want me to carry it for a while?" Carver asked. "We've got a ways to go yet."

Eddie slipped one strap over an inch and sighed. "Nope. It's better now. Save your strength, kid. You have to arm this mother."

Carver nodded. He loved his brother. Eddie had recognized his talent early, had protected him from the other kids in the school yard — Foureyes! Hey, Foureyes! — and finally, after Carver graduated from City College with a chem degree, had brought him into the Green Front itself.

"We can use what you know," Eddie told him then.

Carver hadn't really understood what the Green Front was all about, but

he understood Eddie. And he trusted him. Somehow, if he did what Eddie told him, it would help the cause of peace. When they talked about peace in the Green Front, the word always carried an unspoken capital.

Eddie would never hurt him, Carver knew. And if Eddie believed in something, that was good enough for him. Which was how he came to be trudging down a factory back street in the middle of a Chicago winter night, feeling the wind slice through his jacket while his brother carried a thirty-pound bomb made out of dish cleaner and lawn food. He was somewhat unclear about the objective of this exercise. A government building of some kind, Eddie said. A good cause, a blow for peace. After this, the Green Front would be famous, and money would come. They could build better bombs, strike better blows.

Carver still wasn't sure, but he knew how to make bombs. He knew how to love Eddie.

They came to the place finally, and Eddie lowered the knapsack. It was a doorway down an alley, out of the wind, dimly lit by a single overhead bulb a hundred yards away. Something skittered in a trash dumpster and Carver jumped. Eddie laughed.

"Calm down, kid. It's only a rat."

Carver nodded and got busy with the pack. Two of the batteries had to be connected, and a third wire hooked to a terminal. Then they had ten minutes to get away.

The cold numbed his fingers, made them clumsy. He got the batteries hooked up, but the third wire kept slipping. Eddie watched silently for several moments, then touched his shoulder.

"Let me," he said, pulling Carver away. "I kept my hands in my pockets."

Carver nodded and stepped back. Eddie bent over the pack, his body in front of Carver. Carver watched for a moment. Then his eyes widened in horror.

"*No! Not that terminal —*"

Like bloody leaves, they blew away.

Carver sat straight up in bed, his pajamas soaked with sweat, his heart pounding a devil dance inside his shirt.

"You okay?"

"What?" His bulging stare jerked toward the voice. "Oh. It's you. Hi, Ethel . . ."

"Boy, that must be one hell of a dream." The huge black nurse, her shiny face an ebony mask of concern, grunted and heaved her giant bulk from a chair near the door. By the way she moved, and from a certain competent wariness in her eyes, Carver suspected Ethel was as familiar with a pistol as she was with a bedpan, but that was fine with him. Ethel was okay. Sometimes she smuggled him a Hershey bar when it was her turn to pull duty. Otherwise she was content to simply watch him and read her endless collec-

tion of supermarket newspapers.

"You ain't running no fever, Carver." Her vast paw was like a dry ham on his forehead.

"Naw. Just a nightmare, Ethel."

"The same one?" she asked sharply.

"Uh huh."

She backed away. "You want a shot? You sure you okay?"

He nodded slowly. "Hey, Ethel, you got any candy?"

"You ought to be sleeping, Carver."

"Yeah. But I'm awake, so how about it? Carbohydrates are supposed to make you relax, right?"

She smiled suddenly. "Well, I might have brought something. Let me look in my bag. . . ."

"Yeah." Carter grinned. "See what you got in that old bag there. And hey — can I have one of your papers? I don't feel sleepy anymore."

Her glance was dubious, but a moment later Carver settled back with a double Hershey Bar and a smudged copy of the *International Inquirer*.

LIFE AFTER DEATH blared the headline.

That sounded interesting. He began to read.

Carver couldn't make much sense out of the story. It was a series of interviews with people who had died on operating tables and then been revived. Nobody mentioned the overworld, or the sea of heaving bubbles. Each experience seemed to have a common thread, however. Every person interviewed remembered the slow rise from his body, and each had an encounter with something that sounded like the Light. This was the part Carver read most intensely, for a few people claimed to have gone beyond the Light and found themselves in another place, where friends or family members who had died previously were waiting to greet them.

Was it possible? Was Eddie waiting, just beyond the Light? Could that be why the summons was so strong?

He folded the paper and placed it under his pillow. "Ethel? Can I keep this? I want to read some more when I wake up."

"You go to sleep, you can have the paper. Is that what you gonna do? Go to sleep now?"

"Uh huh."

"Okay," she said.

He knew Eddie was dead. Simpson had told him, several weeks after they were sure he was going to survive the blast. They said Eddie had saved his life by being in front of him and taking the full force of the explosion. But Carver had known before. Something had been severed in that flaming instant, and the loss tortured him still.

He remembered the first time Simpson had come to see him, his jolly fat evil face smiling and smiling.

"You're a very lucky boy," he said.

Carver stared at him.

"Really. You're going to make it. You're going to be fine. Of course, there's a murder charge against you. . . ."

That got him. "A what?"

"Murder one, kid. You and your brother were committing a felony, and he got killed. I know you didn't mean it that way, but it happened. And the law says it's first-degree murder. Big time."

"Oh, Jeezus," Carver said.

"Yeah. Maybe I can help, though."

"You can help? Who are you?" Already, visions of going to the gas chamber filled his head. He decided he could do it. He would say the right things for the Green Front. Maybe the publicity would help. Of course, he would do it for Eddie. That's the way his brother would have wanted it.

"My name's Simpson. Major Simpson. I'm with the government, but don't get me wrong. I can help if I want to."

Carver inspected him suspiciously. "Why would you want to help me?"

The fat man smiled again, and Carver noticed his eyes for the first time. "You were unconscious for a long while, kid. Maybe you were dreaming, or raving. I don't know. But you talked a lot about some Russian guy. Sergei something or other. A general."

"Oh, yeah. General SpecialKay."

"That's it. You remember?"

"Yeah. But it was only a dream."

"Well, what I want you to do is tell me about the dream. Everything you remember. Can you do that? It's like this — you help me, and maybe I can help you. . . ."

Three weeks later they killed him for the first time. They told him it was just another operation, but he knew. After all, it was his second time dead.

"Hey, Simpson. How come you keep killing me?"

The fat man's gaze slid away. They'd just finished going over the sheaf of pictures he'd brought for Carver to look at. Anonymous faces that Simpson hoped would match up with the faces Carver picked out of General SpecialKay's mind. The general's thoughts were in Russian, but Carver was always able to remember the unfamiliar sounds, even though he still couldn't pronounce the general's name correctly.

"It's for a good cause, kid. You help the United States."

"Is that a good cause? What do you do with all the stuff I bring back?"

"We're working for peace, Carver. Just like you. Only we go about it different. You're pretty naive, you know that? In the real world, the only way you have peace is if the Commies are afraid to attack us. And you give us a pipeline right to the top. You're our best spy, Carver. How does that make you feel?"

Like shit, Carver thought. "I dunno. You ever figure out what it is I do?"

Now Simpson shifted uncomfortably in his chair. His huge, flabby chest rose and fell, and a moist, obese sigh flubbed through his pink lips. "You want the truth, they tell me, but I don't know if I understand. It sounds weird to me. But as long as it works — and you check out right up and down the line, Carver. You give us first-class stuff."

"Yeah, but how do I do it? I'm dead when it happens. At least you say I am."

Simpson shrugged. "The eggheads think you read minds. They say it has something to do with what happened to you when you died on the operating table. I guess that's right 'cause you do it. But you're the only one I ever heard of. Which is just about exactly all I know about it."

"Simpson?"

"What?"

"How many more times?"

The fat man looked at the wall behind Carver's head. "I told you already. One more time. Two at the most."

"Okay," Carver said.

They killed him again three days later. Carver could tell it was a rush job. They came in the middle of the night and hauled him away. Simpson seemed tight, like a balloon inflated too much, filled with an awful, gloating expectancy. Afterward, he didn't even wait till Carver was back in his room before he started the tape recorder.

Carver told him all the words because they didn't mean anything to him, and gave him all the visions except one. Whatever he'd said made the fat man happy because when he finished, his face twisted into the first real smile Carver had ever seen.

"Good job, kid," Simpson said. "Great. We've really got the bastards on the run now."

"Another blow for peace, huh?"

Simpson looked at him strangely. "That's right, kid. You could say that. A blow for peace. That's pretty good."

Sure it is, Carver thought. The burning demon image of the fiery mushroom danced behind his eyes. They never gave him newspapers. His room didn't have a television. Simpson didn't tell him anything. But he knew. He knew anyway.

General SpecialKay had been called to the scene of the disaster at Pyata-gorsk, where the latest Soviet Orbital ABM Launcher smoldered under nuclear ash. Simpson questioned him closely about the incident, but Carver hadn't told him anything much. Not about what Simpson really wanted. He was putting the numbers together, and they added up to something that scared him silly. Something involving Simpson, some sly and monstrous thing. From the expression on Major Simpson's face, Carver guessed more

nuclear "mistakes" were in the wind. Carver knew something else, too. He knew that General SpecialKay didn't think it was an accident.

"Is it?" he said.

His copy of the *Inquirer* had mysteriously disappeared a couple of days after he'd gotten it, but he remembered the story almost word for word. It was the mushroom cloud that finally did it. He couldn't fool himself any longer. Not when he could sense the blind hunger in the general's mind, the frenzied urge for revenge. Somewhere hundreds of great engines were slowly turning, their rounded tips searching for innocent cities across great oceans. Maybe even the city in which he was the prisoner of a man equally as insane as the general.

Now he lay awake, staring blindly at the ceiling. Nobody else was in the room. They only watched him a few nights after each death, to make sure he wouldn't die by accident. Otherwise they left him alone.

But I'm not alone, he thought suddenly. Eddie is here. Somewhere. And I don't think Eddie likes what I'm doing. Not one little bit.

Somehow, the bastards had used what he'd told them. He knew he was as responsible for that mushroom cloud as if he'd set off the bomb itself.

Mad bomber. That's what Eddie used to call him, laughing. The mad bomber.

"I can't do this anymore," he whispered softly.

"Yes, you can," a tiny voice called.

Carver thought he recognized the voice. He didn't think it was his conscience.

It took an unbelievable effort, but Carver forced himself to stay close to his body for a few seconds. A hot, spectral wind throbbed beneath him, trying to blow him higher, but he fought it and hung there, staring down, watching and listening.

"You gonna be able to bring him back, Doc?" Simpson said.

The doctor looked across Carver's corpse and shrugged. "This can't go on forever, you know," he said. "We've almost lost him the last couple of times. I don't know how his heart takes it."

Simpson's face was concentrated, intense. "Don't worry about it. Just bring him back. Things are coming to a head. That kid is the most important man in the United States right now. Compared to him, you are dog turds. You understand that, Doc?"

"You're kidding," the doctor said. "This scrawny kid?"

"One more time, Doc," Simpson said. "That's all. Just one more time. I have to find out what the Russkies *know*."

Sorry, Carver thought, but it ain't gonna happen. He let the wind blow him through the roof.

* * *

The Light was all around him now, blinding him. The feeling of speed was intense. It pulled him and pushed him at the same time. He was afraid, but at the same time, something comforted him. What did he have to lose? It wasn't dangerous. He wasn't risking his life.

Suddenly, he noticed the Light had diffused, its hot bright yellow faded to a warm, golden color. The feeling of motion disappeared, and he hung suspended in clear, amber space. Things moved around him, tugged quickly at the edge of his vision, and were gone.

He waited. He felt the most amazing feeling. For a moment he didn't understand, but finally he caught it. Peace. It was peace, utter and complete.

"Hi, kid," Eddie said.

How can I be this happy and still cry? Carver wondered.

"No, don't do that," Eddie said. "You don't need to do that. I'm here. I love you."

Something warm folded Carver up in an infinite soft hug. For the first time in his existence, he realized that his shoulders were finally warm.

He spoke the question.

"No," Eddie said. His voice was sad. "Not yet. You've been back and forth too many times. You've done things you shouldn't have. The Light wasn't meant to be used that way."

Carver reached out and felt Eddie come to him again. "I know," Eddie said. "You couldn't help it. You were afraid. But that doesn't make it right."

Carver nodded.

"You're sort of stuck. Now you have to do something to break free," Eddie said. "You have to fix it so the bad things are made right again."

Eddie told him what he had to do, and Carver understood. He didn't mind. It wouldn't take long, and then he could come back here forever.

This time the Light didn't oppose his passage out. As he floated down, he caught just the tiniest glimpse — taste? — of something unimaginably vast and glowing, something that even though he left, he'd never be apart from again.

It wasn't his obligation, but he couldn't resist one final look. Down below, the doctor pummeled frantically on the corpse's chest. Machines made odd, whining noises. Things crackled and popped. Nurses rushed back and forth.

Simpson's voice was a nonstop babble.

"*You bring him back you bring him back —*"

The thin silver thread that had once connected Carver to the meat on the operating table was gone. Bye bye, he thought. Bye bye.

The overworld shimmered blue above him as he sought out General SpecialKay. Many of the names he wanted were there. For some reason he understood the names now, and he knew how to find them. He found the

general easily. He would be the first.

He entered the general's mind and took names from it like water from a jar. The general knew the mad ones, the evil ones who believed in the specter of a fiery salvation, of an impossible victory. The ones like the general himself.

The nukes would remain, but perhaps mankind could for a while be free of those who had the maniacal desire to use them. The twisted ones who didn't fear the nuclear fires, but instead — insanity! — welcomed a final reckoning on the scorched bones of their enemies. They were a special breed, those men, and their dark stain marred both sides of the conflict.

When he was full of those names, he reached out with something that might have been a hand, but probably wasn't. He knew that from this bubble stretched a thin silver cord, fixed at the other end to an envelope of mortal flesh named Spetsnialkapoletski. Gently, he tugged the thread until it snapped. It was almost like picking a flower. He watched the bubble spiral upward, faster and faster, until it disappeared in the overarching glow.

It took him a long time to finish with all the Russian names, and he was tired when he took up the second half of his task. This time there was a greasy, threatening familiarity to the bubble. The shimmering, translucent thing seemed bloated and gross; he knew it matched the flesh at the other end of its silver cord, but he entered and took its load of names, too.

He reached out and harvested that flower and watched it slowly rise, as if it were weighted down with something terrible and heavy. Still, the bubble that had been Simpson drifted up and dwindled, a speck, a dot, gone. Into the Light.

He wanted to follow the bubble, but not yet. There were so many names. So many bubbles.

So much to do.



CAT-TECH-ISM

My pet cat's synthetic because —
Though it goes against natural laws —

He will never be able
To shred rugs or table:
He comes with programmable paws.

— Esther M. Friesner
Cat-Tech-Ism 87

ON Exhibit

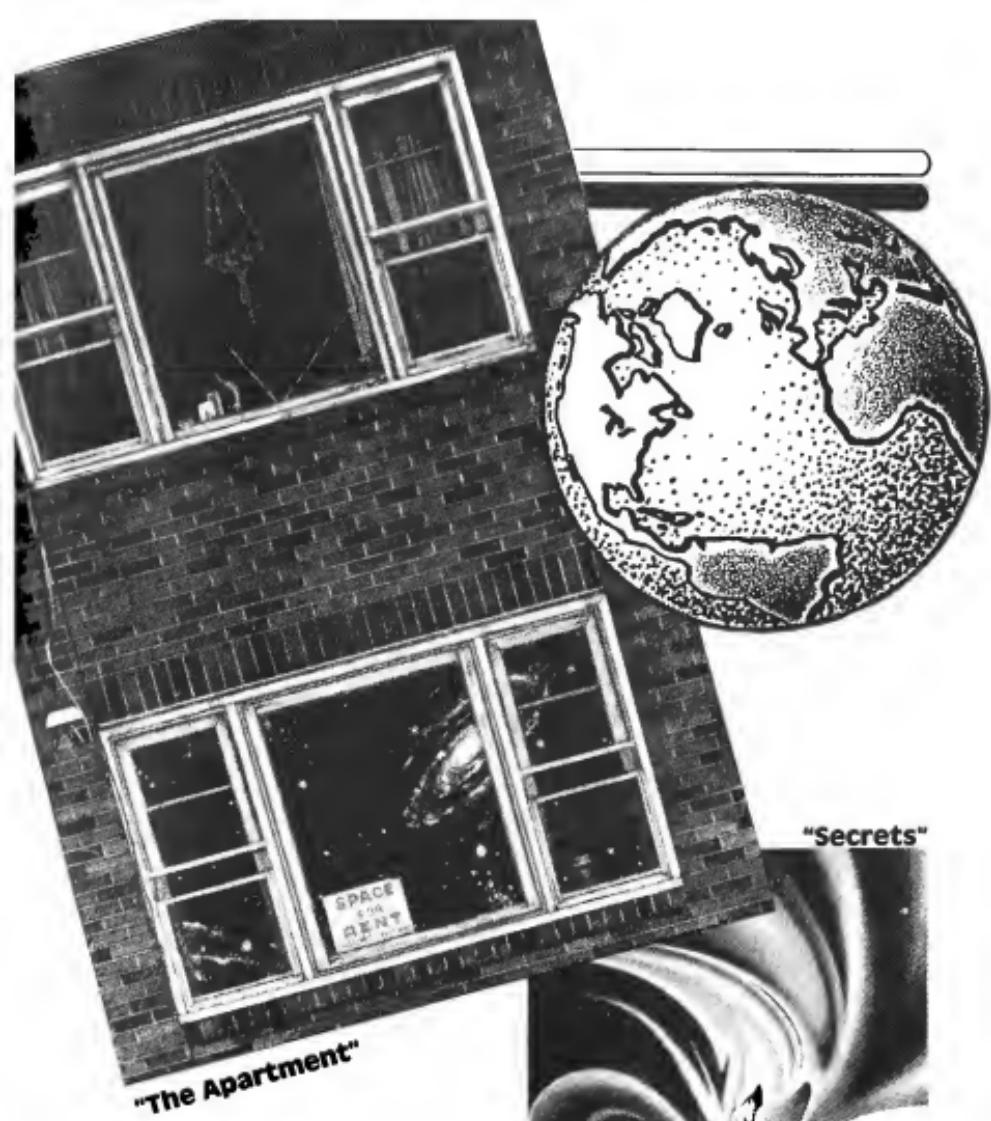
Robert J. Pasternak

Robert J. Pasternak took an interest in science-fiction and fantasy art during early adolescence. Though he has studied at the Forum Art Institute, Robert is primarily a self-taught artist who has been influenced by the works of Salvador Dali, Roger

Dean, and Frank Frazetta. His favorite themes are fantastic portraits and surreal landscapes.

Robert's works have appeared in "Visions of Canada," on LP record jackets for CBS Records, Canada, and in *Amazing Stories*. In fact, Robert is grateful to have illustrated both the cover piece and the interior illustration for Jack Williamson's story "The Mental Man." Since Jack's first professional story sale was to *Amazing Stories*, Robert is pleased





"The Apartment"

to have made his first professional SF art sale to us as well.

Those who are interested in commissions or purchases, or in finding out more about Robert's artwork, can contact him at his studio. Write to: Robert J. Pasternak, 291 Rupert Island Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R2V 0G5.



Robert J. Pasternak



"Finders Keepers"

"New Domain"



HOMING INSTINCT

by Robert Frazier
art: Nicola Cuti



Robert Frazier writes both science-fiction poems and short stories. The former have been collected in Perception Barriers (Berkeley Poets Workshop and Press) and in Co-Orbital Moons (Ocean View Books); the latter have appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Amazing Stories, and In the Field of Fire (Tor Books).

He, his wife, Karol, and his daughter, Timalyne, live on Nantucket Island, located about 20 miles south of Cape Cod.

After nosing his dusty station wagon along roads framed in cypress trees and overhung with Spanish moss, Simon McColley drove into the swamp country called the Athchafalaya and entered the unincorporated town of Cognizant, Louisiana, at twilight. He hoped to find crawfisherman Louis Parti, but moreover he hoped to come to terms with his reality and end his quest of many tiring nights.

The pain of his father's recent death, coupled with the confession his father had made, weighed upon him. He looked inward, and the old blond-boy Simon — the trim, athletic, business executive — became a falsehood that he'd attempted to live for too many years. His flesh seemed to hang as loosely on him as his chosen uniform of faded denims and battered running shoes and a navy blue tee shirt. He hadn't eaten a square meal for days and hadn't slept well for longer. He ran his fingers along his week-old beard and stared doggedly ahead. Simon sought his birthplace, if such a place existed.

Find a fisherman named Parti, his father had said on his sickbed. He'll know where I found you. He was the one who towed our boat in.

Simon pulled the station wagon into a muddy parking lot next to a small grocery store lit by a single low-wattage flood lamp. Beetles circled the bare bulb and slapped themselves against its face as if attempting to penetrate the cleansing world of heat and light inside. Simon rolled up his window and opened his door. He stood and stretched as a sway-backed dog loped by and into the shadows in back of the store. The air smelled of charred meat with a rancid edge.

With the same mix of pessimism and determination he had used to track the rutted roads south, Simon tramped over docks raised above the coffee-brown bayou water and through a maze of screened shacks and humid street corners to the Cooter Café. Hiding beneath a battered fedora, a full-bellied, full-bearded man who fit Parti's description sat in the corner booth. He lavished his attentions equally on dark rum and a cigarette rolled from a blue canister of pipe tobacco. The café was otherwise empty, except for the bare-chested young barkeep and a gaunt fisherman lying face down on the dirt floor in a murky pool of his own vomit.

"He distracts the flies," the barkeep said.

As Simon approached the end booth, Parti acknowledged him with a sweep of his hand. Simon accepted the invitation and sat at the red formica table. Attempting to fall in character with the old man — a protective coloration he'd always cultivated, since he felt out of character and out of place everywhere he'd ever lived — Simon wiped out a fly-specked tumbler and accepted a couple of fingers of rum from Parti's wicker demijohn.

Parti knows those marshes like the veins on his hand. He's still there, I'm sure.

"I'm Simon McColley," he said to Parti.

Parti nodded but said nothing. He seemed to fade back into the smoky corner, which then was lit only by the angry yellow tip of his cigarette.

Simon accepted this silence also, for he considered the big man's rudeness to be just another in a long series of hurdles between him and his goal. Things felt a bit hopeless. He didn't know what to expect of people anymore.

As Simon's eyes adjusted to the dim light, he realized that Parti was unusual. Though Cajuns in the back country weren't the punctilious sort, he wore a recent model watch, and though he drank slowly, Simon got the disconcerting impression that he could time each sip with a metronome. Parti wore a clean, sleeveless tee shirt and overalls. His puffy face showed webbed creases about bloodshot eyes that were still lively, and the olive sheen of his skin contrasted against his full white beard. It suggested Cajun heritage mixed with Portuguese.

Simon had to work at cementing these details and intuitions, fixing his portrait like a photographer coaxing a photo in its developing bath. Parti did not help matters. He alternated between hawking a stare, as if Simon were a puzzle to him, and leaning back in the stall, where he became obscured again in dark smoke like a mountain hooded in rain clouds.

Simon grew peevish in his thoughts. He squinted at the blue glow that shimmered in his palms. His hands shook, and he doubted if he could even converse with Parti successfully. He wanted to yell in frustration.

Parti's the key, Son. He's not afraid of haints and UFOs. He'll take you to Lacombe Island.

"Too hot for talkin,'" Parti said at last. "Don't ya think? So let's not."

Simon nodded and helped himself to another glass of rum. He wanted to wait Parti out, but the tension ate at him. He felt anxious and upset. A call from the Athchafalaya Swamp was reaching deep into his being. It called to that estranged half of him that yearned for peace.

"I'm afraid I must talk, Monsieur Parti."

For a moment Parti's attention shined on Simon, and Simon watched his twinned reflections pop up in Parti's eyes like matching images in a slot machine. Though Simon looked and dressed like any faceless, blond drone of American urban life, Parti must have sensed that he was different. Perhaps he saw just how different! He certainly saw a chance for a profit.

"Of course, of course." Parti leaned forward. "You've an important deal to make. Eh? So man, what's yer deal?"

Son, his father had said with a sad look that cut to the quick of Simon's heart. You aren't really mine. I found you in the swamps. On a spit of land in the middle of nowhere. I never told you because I never told anyone. No one would believe what happened there that night. Not a soul.

"I'm looking for someone who can take me to the right place, monsieur. A certain place."

Parti snaked his butt into an ashtray and ground it out. He drummed his thick, nicotine-stained fingers on the table in time to a Zydeco accordian song on the tinny radio above the bar.

"That, my friend, might depend on where it is."

Simon, it wasn't like anyplace I've ever been.

Simon could hear the dollar figures run through Parti's head like bus tokens through a counter. Simon sighed. Let the man be distracted by money. Let him not listen hard to Simon's lies.

"I'll need a little outfitting. I'm a photographer and must protect my special equipment."

The words sounded hollow as he mouthed them. He might as well have said he was a simple man, full of human curiosity.

"Ya want an untouched place. Eh? With wildlife?"

"Yes. The most beautiful. But I'd rather see Bayou Lacombe, if there is one. It's the source of many rumors. I imagine it as colorful and grandly odd."

"Damned it truly is!" Parti snorted. "But ya don't want to go near Lacombe. Bad place. Thicketed with palmetto and scabby brush. Congo eels. Coral snakes. And haunted, some say."

The swamp was full of ambient light that evening. You could see everything so clearly. But Lacombe Island had a presence of its own. That's why I motored up to it. And like a fool sheared my propeller on a sunken limb.

Hope seemed to pulsate like a homing signal in Simon and then die. He tried to sound knowledgeable, though in fact he knew less about himself and the truth than he had a week ago.

"But people have gone there and come back."

"Sure. Someone's boat always breaks down. Eh? I made a rescue there long ago."

Parti's eyes narrowed, and he stared hard at Simon. Simon heard questions running through the old man's head.

"And there were those bird watchers from Shreveport. I led 'em out of Little Sulphur. Dowdy people who looked past ya like somethin' rare sat on yer shoulder. They couldn't recognize nothin' magical if it smacked 'em on their asses." Parti halted his speech. He'd realized that he'd said too much.

I was stuck in the swamps, his father had explained with long pauses for breath. But not alone. A crackling ball of blue lightning hovered near the shore, so I followed it to a clearing burned out on the hummock. That's what you look for.

Simon remembered Little Sulphur from the maps. This meant that Bayou Lacombe lay near the swamp's most forbidding recesses.

The blue lightning ball hovered over the center of the clearing, casting its rays on where you lay. I'm sorry I never took you back there. He'd wept with his father. I'm sorry.

He could mount his own expedition now, but Parti might assure a measure of success. Guessing at what the game demanded, Simon tried to seem gullible and carry the air of a mouthy traveler. He swallowed hard and watched the blue color fade from his hands.

"Well, I'm a birder, too. But I listen with my eyes fixed on the ground. You can't get anywhere but Hell by stepping on a scorpion. I learned that as a kid in the infantry."

Parti grinned. "Perhaps we'll come to terms."

Simon ignored him. "Also, you have to watch out for bugs. I've never been here before. But I've seen them in Cambodia. Bugs dense as brush along the Upper Mekong." Simon spread his arms. "And I know how they lap up dope. I use a bichloride. Not as a relief, mind you, but to prevent blood poisoning."

"Got fever mosquitoes here," Parti said.

"Now they're an act of God! In the dark, how can you tell if they're standing on all sixes or on their heads like the malarial kind? You have to have faith. It's like the mushroom test."

Parti leaned into view. Though he felt oddly humorless, Simon knew that if he could make the old man laugh at this moment, then a sense of trust and camaraderie might grow between them. It had with his father, finally.

I'm sorry, his father had repeated. *I never got a clue to who your mother was. Perhaps a woman who died in childbirth.* Simon had seen then that his mother must have been a local, like his father. Neither had speculated on the race and identity of his true father. *Simon, I felt I was your flesh and blood.* You were, Simon had told him, but Simon had trouble feeling it.

Parti wiped sweat from his brow. "Eh?"

"There's only one unfailing method for distinguishing between the edible ones and those you must not eat. If it's a mushroom, you dine. If it's a toadstool, you die!"

Parti guffawed loud enough to wake the fisherman passed out on the floor. They received a few inquisitive stares from a new couple cooling themselves at the bar.

Over the course of the next few hours, Simon and Parti traded many anecdotes and mixed them with plans for their "sortie" into the Athchafalaya the next day. Parti stated that it was difficult to progress through the weedy trickles and stagnant openings that connected Bayou Lacombe with the main swamp, but he never said it was impossible. He boasted drunkenly that he had instincts enough to take them there blind, if necessary.

"McColley, eh?" Parti said with a wink at one point. "I knew a man by that name. Ya sure ya never been through these parts before?"

Simon heard the name "McColley" rattle through Parti's skull. He actually heard it clearly. He stared down at his limp hands and frowned.

"I guess I'd remember if I had," he said. "Wouldn't I?"

"Perhaps," Parti answered with a chuckle. "Perhaps."

But in Parti's thoughts, the old man already considered Simon another chapter in the legacy of Bayou Lacombe. Simon felt attached to this shrewd fisherman with the glittering eyes, and at that moment, they seemed bound in a web greater than both their lives. For once, he laughed with Parti.

It was a bloody eerie feeling. Simon's father had laughed also, but it twisted into a ragged cough. There I was afraid, and you were asleep in the clearing. You were wrapped in a cloth that looked silvery when the moon peeked between the clouds. The ball lightning darkened to a cold cerulean and settled down into the cloth with you and winked out.

When I'd worked up my nerve enough to take a close look at you, you were so tiny and frail. Yet you breathed peacefully. You seemed to glow with contentment when I picked you up. Then I heard Parti's motor and called out to him.

Around midnight Simon left Parti slumped over in the booth and paid the bartender a fifty to cover their excesses. He stepped out into the cooling air filled with mystery and salt smells blowing up from the gulf. He leaned against the café's porch railing and let exhaustion and the rum take hold of him.

Simon felt delivered in a religious sense. Parti would ferry him. The Cajun fisherman reminded Simon of the native navigators he'd read about in the Carolines and the deep Pacific that preserved ancestral star tracks to islands that weren't there anymore. His father had been one also. It had taken much bravery and abandon to steer Simon to the painful truth, especially at the very end.

Son. There's something inside you that you must discover. Don't hold back any longer.

The road through Cognizant was pitch black, with one distant streetlamp, so in order to light his way to the station wagon, Simon no longer suppressed the cold blue fire in the palm of one hand. It shimmered on the surface of his skin like a familiar sun, and for a moment, his earthly countenance fell away. He felt far less a natural being than the bayou's glowing cup fungi or the curious *gaspergou*, the "talking" fish whose drumming croak he heard in the shallows beneath the docks.

Simon might not be going home — no, that must be farther still, much farther — but at least he was sailing closer than he'd ever been before. •

A ROMANTIC YOUNG EARTHMAN

A romantic young Earthman named White
Met a lady from Altair one night.
With love overloaded,
They kissed — and exploded —
'Cause her DNA didn't coil to the right.

— Mike Curry
A Romantic Young Earthman 97

STAINED BLACK

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

art: Nicola Cuti

Kristine Kathryn Rusch is a former Wisconsinite currently living in Eugene, Oregon. She writes educational scripts for Wisconsin Public Radio and the Annenberg Foundation. Her nonfiction work has appeared in Publisher's Weekly, Emmy, and many other places, while her short stories have been published in Aboriginal SF and Amazing® Stories.

In a world stained black, he felt colors as objects: blue as an ice cube, red a burning coal. Simpson stepped out of the blind man's body and into his own.

"I'll take it," he said.

The body arrived in a wooden sarcophagus, an ironic touch that sent shivers down Simpson's back. He directed the delivery workers to his studio. They gaped at the ceramic tiles, the marble colonnades, and the large white walls where he had hung his paintings. Sunlight streamed into the eastern windows, illuminating the workers as they set the box down. Simpson memorized the moment. Maybe this time he would use the image, although he suspected he would not. His beautiful studio was sterile; anything he painted in it looked washed-out and dull. The problem was neither the light nor the studio. The problem was that he had conquered his art without understanding it.

He tipped the workers generously and told them to find their own way out. Then he watched from the studio windows as the workers headed, empty-handed, to their van. His wealth was still too new for him to be careless with it. Part of him suspected that one day he would wake up to find everything missing — the spectacular house, the wonderful furniture, and his paintings. Taken because he no longer deserved them.

The sunlight warmed his face, and he leaned into the heat. Perhaps yellow felt that soft and gentle. But he didn't know. The feeling of yellow rested in a blind man's body, hidden in a black box.

Simpson knelt beside the sarcophagus and ran his hand across the figure carved in the wood. The carving, with its widely spaced eyes and high cheekbones, looked vaguely Egyptian. Near the foot of the cover was the name of the house he had purchased the body from. Perhaps the manufacturer had thought that black was somber. But black was poetry. Black absorbed all light, becoming and hiding all colors.

His fingers found the tiny depression, and the coffin clicked as it unlocked. He threw the cover back. The pungent odor of mothballs mixed



with formaldehyde assaulted his nostrils and sent another shiver through him. The manufacturer played on his expectations of death. Simpson knew that the body couldn't have been preserved in such an archaic way, but the smell brought out fears as old as time. Before him lay someone who was dead. And he would climb into that dead body and use it as if it were his own. Perhaps the mixture of repulsion and curiosity was what had made these Alter Egos so popular.

The blind man had bold features: a strong nose, high cheekbones, and eyebrows that slashed his face. His body was longer than Simpson's, which had caused Simpson some problems in the store. The blind man was wearing a linen suit that seemed to accentuate his pallor, made him look as if he had been dead for a long time.

Simpson reached down and touched the blind man's cool hand. This body held secrets to color, secrets that could save Simpson's art. Color. Maybe colors could be scents, too. If they were, mothballs mixed with formaldehyde were purple, bright purple. Too vivid to use any way except alone.

He had been cautioned not to lift the body out of the box, and he guessed that the main circuitry rested not in the body but in the coffin itself. He flicked a small switch at the base of the blind man's left ear, rested himself against the edge of the coffin as he had been taught, grabbed both hands and closed his eyes. He wasn't completely sure how the transfer worked, although he knew it had something to do with electronics that simulated nerve impulses. His consciousness followed a path laid out by the circuitry into the blind man's body. Contact with the coffin kept Simpson's own body functioning until his consciousness returned.

"The transfer," the clerk had said, "is like changing clothes. You don't think about the actual movements, for that will confuse you. You simply take off one skin and step into another."

Simpson took off his body and stepped into the blind man's. He had a brief sense of entering something that was no longer alive, that had resonances of animation. The new skin seemed to crawl around him, and then the feeling passed as the body accepted him. The odor of mothballs and formaldehyde grew stronger, and beneath it, he could smell the pine of the box. The house seemed to creak as it settled, and he thought he heard the whisper of synthetic blood as it started coursing through the veins. Then he opened the sightless eyes and saw lacquered darkness.

The world became textured. The wood-smooth side of the sarcophagus, the soft linen of the blind man's jacket, the soothing warmth of his own abandoned hands — living but lifeless — resting in the blind man's palms. Simpson sighed and sat the body up, afraid to do anything wrong.

They had offered him lessons, of course. Disabled was stylish this year, now that the strangeness of walking about in someone else's body had dulled. The manufacturers could easily have fixed the eyes, but there was more profit in marketing imperfect bodies. The lessons, which would have

taught him how to read braille and operate the sonar shield around the blind man's body, cost twice as much as the body itself.

He refused to take them, but not because of the price. He was afraid that the lessons, which would have taught him to see without eyes, would have destroyed the colors.

Slowly, he moved his own hands aside and grabbed the edge of the coffin. He knew that six meters to his left stood a small table with a house phone. If he moved carefully enough, he might be able to find it. He stood and lifted the blind man's leg out of the box. The foot fell heavily on the hardwood floor, but no pain registered in Simpson's mind. He marveled at the circuitry which could hook up some degrees of feeling, but not others. Placing the weight on the outside foot, he brought the other foot out and down.

"Well, Simpson," he murmured to himself and stopped. The voice startled him. It was an octave too low. He added what he had originally intended as an admonition, but which suddenly became an experiment in sound: "To work."

To work. He lurched forward, determined to find the phone. He couldn't paint in a blind man's body, but he could feel and remember. Suddenly, the table banged against the thighs. Simpson reached down and grabbed the phone before the table fell over. He set the table upright and then touched the damaged area, wondering if reconstituted corpses bruised.

He picked up the receiver, placed the fingers on the buttons, and counted over until he found the correct one. In the brief moments between depressing the button and his secretary's response, Simpson remembered that his voice would sound strange.

"Sir?" Piercy's voice didn't sound normal either. It was a shade too metallic as if the phone were processing the tones differently.

"I'm trying the new body. Send a model to me, would you? One I haven't seen before."

"Yes, sir."

Simpson hung up the phone and stood in the silence of his studio. The sunlight falling on the blind man's face felt no different than it had when it fell on his own, but he knew if he reached far enough into the blind man's vision, he would discover what yellow felt like. Yellow. Yellow was smooth as a petal on a daffodil bathing in the sun. Poetic, but not the blind man's image. More Simpson's, like formaldehyde and mothballs. Yellow. He reached for it. Yellow —

A knock echoed throughout the studio, and the glimmerings of a vision disappeared from his head.

"Come in!" The way Simpson used it, the blind man's voice was rough. The doors clicked open. Too late he wondered what the model would think when she saw Simpson's body lying half-in and half-out of a sarcophagus.

Heels tapped against the hard wood, growing closer.

"I'm sorry —" Simpson started, but she interrupted as if she hadn't heard

him speak.

"How ghoulish." Her soft voice was filled with sarcasm, not disgust. "You're the third artist I've seen with one of those things."

"I should have warned you."

"Warned nothing. But I can tell you it won't do any good." Her heels slid across the floor slightly. "What do you want, nude?"

He nodded, glad that she was professional. "Why won't it do any good?"

"Because you see with your brain, not your eyes." She paused. He heard fabric snap and rustle. "The last artist, Teague, did a before-and-after. Me through his eyes, me through the corpse's eyes. He got halfway through the second one before he quit. Waste of three days for him, but I made good money."

A zipper opened, and after a moment, her shoes clattered to the floor. He heard fabric rustle once again before her rich, feminine scent — soap mingled with skin oils and a light dusting of sweat — drifted over to him.

"Where do you want me?"

"Over here." He held out the blind man's hands.

"Lighting's poor," she said suspiciously. "And you aren't set up."

"I can't paint in this body. It's blind."

"Then what do you want me for?"

He could feel rather than hear the slight change in her mood. "I want to paint what a blind man senses." The silence grew as he realized he couldn't explain what he was trying to do. "I want to touch you and listen to you, then paint you as I imagined you to be."

"Weirdest job I ever had," she muttered. "I'll do it, but the minute you try something, I'm gone. And I'll bill you for my full fee."

"Fine," he said.

"Private parts are private."

"I know."

Her bare feet whispered against the wood as she walked over to him. He turned toward the sound, and she grabbed the wrist (why couldn't he think of it as *his* wrist?), placing the right hand against her shoulder. Simpson concentrated.

"Christ, your hands are cold." A little shudder ran through her.

He slid the palm down her arm, over her elbow to her forearm. Nothing, just the smoothness of skin, the warmth of a woman mingling with her smell —

He realized he was getting aroused, but the body wasn't. There was no physical change, no warm yearning in the groin. He noted the fact with interest, then reached for the color: brown, dark and smooth like soft, expensive chocolate. He could almost imagine how she would taste, bitter and sweet at the same time.

Suddenly, he felt another presence in the body, as if a hand had reached into his clothes. The blind man's body stirred and began to swell. It had to be a belated response to Simpson's arousal, but the body wasn't supposed to

work that way. Only Simpson's consciousness had been transferred, not his brain. He controlled the body's movements like a puppeteer controlled his marionette — only there were certain strings that weren't hooked up. It cost more to get a body that functioned like a real human body, that allowed its wearer to eat, sleep, and make love.

The body's arousal became more insistent. Simpson could feel the physical changes, throbbing with an urgency of their own. He took his hands off the model, hoping that she couldn't see the erection straining against the pants. "Thank you."

"That's it?" she asked. "Five minutes of touchy-feely, and we're done?"

"That's all." He had to let her go. If he continued to touch her, he couldn't be responsible for the body. He didn't have enough control over it.

"I'll get my full fee, won't I? I mean, I've never been touched by a dead man before."

"I'm not dead," Simpson said as he clasped the blind man's hands together. The body trembled with the strength of its desire.

"No, but that — thing — you're in is." Her voice moved from him as she walked back to her clothes.

"It's like wearing a mink coat. Or alligator shoes."

"I've heard that one before." The zipper closed. "That's the line they feed you when they sell it to you. Why else would someone pay so much money to own a corpse? It's disgusting when you think about it. Twenty-five years ago, that thing would be rotting in the ground. Makes me wonder what kind of people sell their bodies for this."

Slowly, the body's arousal was going away and so was the sense of another presence. Simpson felt a small thread of relief. "I'm not paying you for your opinions."

"Did you ask where they got that body?" she asked, ignoring him. "I heard that some funeral parlors are selling them and burying empty boxes. I was planning to get cremated, but now I don't know. I just hope I die of some awful disease so they can't make me into one of those things —"

"I'd like to get to work," Simpson said. He didn't want to hear any more. He needed this body. He didn't care where it came from or how disgusting it was. The model started walking away, without putting on her shoes.

"You know," she said. "The worst thing is the rumors. They say that sometimes reactivating the body brings the soul back, like the person was too strong to abandon his own body. Could you imagine what it would feel like to crawl into someone else's body and then realize that you're not alone?"

Simpson shivered, although the body did not. "We're through now."

"I want to see the painting when it's done."

"Fine," Simpson said to get rid of her. He had to get the body back to the sarcophagus before he could start painting. He waited until the studio doors closed before starting across the room, arms extended before him. Perhaps it

would have been better for him to crawl. Everything was on the floor, nothing above waist height. If he tripped, the body would fall and could get damaged. And he wouldn't know, since it didn't feel pain.

He shuffled forward until the toes hit something. Wood. The sarcophagus. Bending over, he felt the edge and then the interior of the box. He put the legs in first and then the torso. Before he laid the body down, he reached for his own hands. When they rested in the blind man's hands, he tried to step out of the body. Suddenly, he was stuck like a child trying to take off a pullover. He couldn't breathe, couldn't move. Someone was pushing against him, other arms getting in the way of his. He tried to remember if he was supposed to flick the switch before getting out. But that made no sense: the circuitry had to stay on for him to survive. He tried again and stepped into nothingness as something grasped at him. An instant later, he was in his own body.

Light stabbed at his eyes, and his right leg ached. The blind man lay in his coffin, his skin turning a pasty white as the synthetic blood settled on his back side. It looked as if it were dying again. The model had been right; the body's hands were cold. Simpson pulled his own hands away and flicked off the switch.

He was resting in a stream of light. Simpson imagined that it looked like a medieval religious painting. A man bent over a coffin, the corpse lying serenely, and the light, the blessing from God, bathing them in purity. Only this was no blessing from God. If God did exist, then the Alter Egos were manufactured by God's competitor.

The idea startled him. He rarely thought in religious terms. As he stood up, he put the image out of his mind. His body was cramped from lying in one position so long. But he had no time to baby himself. He had a painting to complete.

Dierdre set the painting in the center of the gallery and stood back to admire it. "It's nice to see you doing good work again, Robert," she said.

Simpson walked over beside Dierdre to check the lighting. The painting was good, better than anything he had done in a long time. He had painted it in browns against a cream background. A woman's narrow waist, high breasts, broad shoulders, and slender face rose from a vat of dark chocolate. Her stance was coy, seductive, and her eyes were sensual instead of innocent. He had titled the painting *Dark Chocolate*.

"Have you any more?" Dierdre asked.

He shook his head. "I've only just started to work again."

Dierdre frowned. "I've always said artists should not have money. It ruins their work."

Simpson ignored the remark. He knew where the money would go if it didn't line his pockets. "Am I ruined? I thought you said this is good."

"It is." Dierdre tucked her hands in the pockets of her dress. The orange

garment set off her deep tan and dark hair. "It looks like you'll be one of the lucky ones. You can paint no matter how you're living, but I've known artists who have had a choice: eating or painting. Look at Teague. He did his best work ten years ago."

"I hear he's bought an Alter Ego."

Dierdre wrinkled her tiny nose. "One of those corpse things? Poor man. When an artist starts using a gimmick, you know he's almost through." She started down the watercolors aisle toward her office and then stopped. "You know, if you could do a color series, we might do a show. Title them *Royal Purple* or *Majestic Magenta* or something." And then she smiled, apparently realizing how close to a gimmick her suggestion was. "Actually, give me a half-dozen of anything — good, that is — and we'll put something together."

Simpson watched her walk, her orange skirt swaying with each step. He was halfway through another painting, mothballs exploding out of a jar of formaldehyde in a splash of purple. But watching the orange flare in the soft light of the gallery, he realized there were so many colors he hadn't felt yet. And even yellow, which he had felt, still eluded him.

He looked again at his latest painting, standing alone in the center of the room. The browns were deep and sensual, but they lacked. He had not painted chocolate with its warm smell and bittersweet taste. What he had done was paint chocolate's shell, the way it appeared to the untrained eye. He wanted something richer, something so real that the patron could touch the painting and be surprised that the liquid didn't stain his fingers.

Simpson stared at the vat of chocolate, and the longer he stared, the closer he came to an understanding. Color was more than light reflecting a certain point on the spectrum. Color was too sensual for mere sight. The blind man had taken color to another level. And Simpson had gone with him.

Yellow: warm and sticky as a pan of boiled milk.

He painted a white cow, outlined in black, kicking over a pail. Yellow liquid spilled across the canvas, streaming upward, becoming daffodils, becoming sunlight.

The blind man's body shivered. Simpson felt battered as if the shivers pummeled him inside of the skin. He had to escape while orange still eluded him.

Green: cool and scratchy as freshly mown grass.

He painted trees in twilight. Green ran like sap down their trunks, growing brighter until it exploded vividly on the bottom of the canvas.

The blind man's breath came in irregular gasps. Simpson craved air. Something was suffocating him. He had to escape before reaching magenta.

Pink: the wet/dry kiss of a cat.

He painted a Persian against a black background, eyes closed, her tiny tongue a brushstroke of hot pink.

The blind man's eyes dripped tears. Simpson felt overwhelmed by sadness, as if someone else's melancholy were clawing at him. He had to escape without touching lavender.

Black: he had yet to experience black. But he wanted to. Black was all colors and no color. One morning, when sunlight filled the studio, he climbed into the blind man's skin and reached for black, although the world was black. Putting on the blind man terrified him, for it seemed as if Simpson's control of the body lessened each time he activated the body. Simpson suppressed the fear. The model had placed that suggestion in his head. And besides, artists had to take risks for their art. He opened himself up to black, and color, light on the visible spectrum, receded, red-shifting; however, he felt it instead of saw it — as if he dove into a flaming pyre. Then a blue shift, cooling him. And then the colors were sucked away and replaced by a presence, the blind man himself giving Simpson a tour of the blind man's mind.

Simpson tried to scream, but he couldn't. He no longer had control of the blind man's body. The blind man held Simpson and taught him what color really was.

The blind man felt color because his world, stained black, contained all colors, stored them and hid them and paraded them out for Simpson one by one. In such darkness, in such blackness, color did not exist. Color was a guess based on description supplied by a friend. Color was a combination of scent, temperature, and sound that changed with each passing moment. Color was light reflected, but not seen. Simpson finally understood: in a world stained black, color was fiction.

The realization frightened him, and as his mind panicked, the body's lack of response terrified him even more. He was trapped in the blackness, with feelings that were not his own. He tried to take off the blind man, but he got stuck in the limbs. They wrapped themselves around him, cutting at him, strangling his mind until colors exploded in his head, remembered colors — the blue of reflected sunlight on a lake, the red of early morning dawn, the yellow of a single daffodil against the green of a meadow. He was an artist. Someone who dealt in light and color, who turned experience into drops of oil on a canvas, who made life more vivid than it had ever seemed.

An artist was useless to a blind man.

Unless their consciousness shared the same body.

Unless the blind man wanted to see.

Simpson scrambled, fought as he tried to untangle himself from a body that wasn't his. The blind man was absorbing the images from Simpson's mind, seeing, for the first time, what colors really were. Simpson could feel

himself being sucked in by blackness, drowning along with the light.

And he could feel the blind man reaching for remembered life. They had given Simpson a body that malfunctioned. The blind man's consciousness had returned with each activation. Simpson's presence had given the blind man an incentive to start living again. And the blind man had the advantage — he knew how to use his own body. He had been hiding from Simpson the entire time.

Colors exploded. Light exploded. Simpson could feel the blind man's greed as the blackness engulfed them.

The blind man posed beside his first painting.

"Mr. Simpson," the photographer said, "please rest your arm on the frame."

The blind man lifted Simpson's arm and propped it against the metal corner. Fortunately, he was a quick study. Simpson's body would have lost its skill if the blind man hadn't had the foresight to probe the artistic side of Simpson's consciousness as well. Poor Simpson. His consciousness was trapped in a corpse in a sarcophagus stored in the attic. The blind man had wondered if Simpson still existed after the circuitry had been shut off. The blind man certainly wasn't going to turn the body back on in order to find out.

The blind man turned his attention to the painting. Titled *The Users*, it had sold first at the opening and for the highest price. A simple portrait, reminiscent of medieval religious painting, of a man leaning over a sarcophagus, sucking the darkness from the corpse as the corpse sucked light. And all around them, sunlight separated into a halo of color, winking like stars along the spectrum, in blues, reds, yellows, and greens. •

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CURSE OF THE DEVIL'S WIFE

Her dining room curtains
are darkly stained
from the heated fumes
of sulphur and brimstone.

The chaise longue is slashed
by the random exclamations
off his razor-sharp tail,
sacked with burn holes

from the fetid black cigars
he tongues more lovingly,
though no more often,
than her sweating pores.

A brutish rogue who lives
from match to burning match
as he has for millennia;
on weekends they stay home

and watch the paint blister.
Or he calls up his friends,
goblins and demon princes,
for a cookout by the pool.

Her garden is soiled again.
She prays he drinks enough
to quell the priapic legend
he must bury in their room,

to give her a night unspent
in endless conjugal rites,
tedious and incomplete
as a list of the damned.

— Bruce Boston

THE DESIGNERS' UNIVERSE

by Gregory Benford

Gregory Benford is a professor of physics at the University of California, Irvine, and a notable science-fiction writer and essayist. His previous essays in Amazing® Stories include "Hard? Science? Fiction?" (July 1987) and "Pandering and Evasions" (January 1988).

Robert Silverberg's Worlds of Wonder. Warner, 352 pps., \$17.95.

The Blind Watchman by Richard Dawkins. New York: W. W. Norton, 332 pps., \$18.95.

Order out of Chaos by Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers. New York: Bantam, 349 pps., \$10.95.

Roger's Version by John Updike. New York: Knopf, 329 pps., \$17.95.

Science fiction is supposed to be about Big Ideas. At least, that's what we're told so often.

Ignore the semi-westerns featuring lone space pioneers on eerie worlds. Forget the clash of vast starship fleets, captained by figures resembling Horatio Hornblower. Tiptoe quickly by the post-apocalypse utopias or dystopias, whose inhabitants use bits of old technology but behave as though they have learned nothing from history.

There is SF that fulfills the promise of the genre. But lately I find that the burgeoning field of science writing is often taking up what we should be ruminating upon, and doing us one better. There are, to be sure, worthy attempts to combine science writing and SF, as in the series *The Planets* and *The Universe*, published by Bantam Books. But overall, I've found an interesting thread running through recent nonfiction and even mainstream fiction that bears inspection with an SF-oriented eye.

Is SF getting left behind in the idea sweepstakes? One can cite plenty of writers noted for their ideas — Brin and Bear, Connie Willis and Barrington Bailey, all able craftsmen. But maybe we can learn more by first peering backward, at the earlier grand age of magazine short SF — the era from 1945 to the early 1960s.

Worlds of Wonder is "a three-level attempt to come to some understanding of what science fiction is and how one goes about creating it, and to convey some of the understanding to others," as Robert Silverberg sets his goals in the book's first paragraph. Overall, it's a unique and successful work.

We all know there is a special SF "feel," and Silverberg selects the thirteen stories of this volume to elicit and inspect that mysterious essence. I was struck by how much he is a hard-core SF reader; "I can go to John Updike for style, to Faulkner for character, to Dostoevski for plot, to Thomas Mann for ideas, to Graham Greene for pace. . . . But not one of them can deliver those moments of visionary power that science fiction has brought me. . . ."

This prefaces remarks about Jack Vance's "The New Prime," a refurbished title for the marvelously pulpy 1951 story, "Brain of the Galaxy." It's a marvel of compression, giving you six plotty lumps that converge to a

clipped, surprising finish. I can easily see the fifteen-year-old Silverberg thrilling to the sweep and heady power of this yarn, yearning to learn its lessons. He did; devotion to Vance's unique manner of conjuring up arcane yet recognizable strangeness informed much of the Majipoor series. This enables him to set forth Vance's strategies, taking us through the way the story was set up and showing why it works.

Silverberg is even better with lesser work. Instead of picking a famous Henry Kuttner story, he selects "Home Is the Hunter" from a 1953 *Galaxy*, when Silverberg was reaching "marginal professional quality as a writer." The story seems dated now, its method stiff and at times transparent, yet it does have power. Students of SF short-story writing can study Silverberg's following essay for useful digressions on the dangers of first-person point of view ("... the writer — totally identified in his own mind with the narrator — tends to run on and on in unfocused drone of events"), risky variant forms (as in the story, where "the protagonist pretends to be addressing *himself*"), the extreme constraints of stories under 4,000 words, and detailed ruminations on the choices Kuttner had to make throughout. If you've ever wondered how much has to go into structuring, this essay and several others will be a revelation. Thank God, most of this labor is done by the subconscious. Otherwise, the astonishing records of prolific writers like Philip K. Dick (28 magazine stories in 1953) and Robert Sheckley (24 in that year) would be beyond comprehension.

Wonder and narrative speed captivated the young Silverberg, and seem to still. Even so, his repute as a stylist is foreshadowed by his reverence for

C. L. Moore's "No Woman Born" from a 1944 *Astounding*. In comparison with today's short work some of the stories in this book seem schematic, their wiring diagrams too obvious; the Moore piece has a wholeness and smooth surface that seem quite current. Silverberg uses this to sound out the constraints that make SF writing unique: "The speculative premise, if it's developed with real rigor, is apt to crowd out characterization. Conversely, to delve deep into the souls of a story's characters may cut into the space available for the exposition of the premise, or . . . some reduction of subplot development." Along the way he explores what action actually is in a story, the tradeoffs of style and atmosphere, flaws and Homeric nods, and the crucial hidden fulcrum of the plot.

His autobiographical opening essay allows him to nostalgically invoke his own ineptitude, while giving tips on what shaped his awareness of what fiction can do. A lengthy discourse on Kitto's *Greek Tragedy* gives forth an interesting thesis on finding the true dramatic center of any work. There is much ironic contrast, as he relates his scholarly pursuits of literature at Columbia University and simultaneous rejection by the lowest pulp markets. He even quotes in full some embarrassing rejection slips from H. L. Gold ("... appalling glibness . . . invariably taking the easiest way out . . . literary yard goods. . . . The time has come for you to do some real work to learn your craft. If not now, when?"). I smiled at these, for vast ambition often does go along with abysmal ineptitude, in a literature that so moves adolescents. And because I got quite similar Dutch-uncle letters from Silverberg back when I started; such are our common roots.

I'd recommend reading this instruc-

tive collection through in sequence, since the auctorial arguments build, and you also gain a sense of the technical development of the genre. You might try, as I did, reading some recent mainstream stories at the same time. Their current vogue for deliberately flattened passive-depressive characters against freeze-dried backgrounds contrasts vastly with the restless energy and curiosity of these SF works. You come away wondering why there is so little communication between Us and Them; we could both learn something. Mainstream's anxious self-importance seems in this light laughable; its reductionist fury would not allow in Bob Shaw's elegant "Light of Other Days" or Fred Pohl's "Day Million," which in this volume come as fitting caps to an impressive evolution in the genre.

These stories tell us how far we have come. Strikingly, even the Pohl and Shaw stories (from 1966) depend heavily on *idea* — indeed, "Day Million" compresses the central message of SF. Plot and dazzling speculation mark the older stories, underlining how idea alone has faded as the cornerstone of the SF short story.

In the 1940s, stories lacking that crucial originality were called "mood" stories — a term that might well apply to much of the field today. I think pure conceptual originality — that zesty fire that made your eyes widen when you first started reading the stuff — is getting rarer.

Nowadays, when a writer with a whole batch of new notions appears, he is wildly greeted, as was John Varley in the 1970s. The writer of the 1980s who most echoes the astonishing productivity of the forefathers, Lucius Shepard, reuses SF ideas and tropes, stressing a narrative and stylistic momentum seldom equaled. His work

rings very differently from the stories in this volume.

Other of our more recent stars of the short form, such as Karen Joy Fowler, have gone far with stylistic and character effects. I suspect this is because inside this field we have learned from all sources, including the recent rise of academic schools. Still, we haven't forgotten our elemental origins and crafts, and that elusive but instantly recognizable SF feel.

But we have, alas, lost some of our command of knowledge's far horizons. I don't find SF generally as filled with pure, fascinating ideas as it once was. Maybe this is just my own jaded taste talking here, but I suspect the truth lies somewhat deeper. Consider what's happening in science itself, which fuels (or should fuel) our speculations.

Suppose you are walking through verdant woods and find a gold watch. Its intricate, bright works stand out in their sharp, mechanical order against the soft background of lush life. Who made this thing?

For some philosophers, the sheer wonder of biological complexity seemed an argument for the prior intervention of God. How could the detailed, intertwined processes that rule nature's enormous engines be unplanned? The gold watch merely jolts us, on our walk; it is in fact less fabulous than the mysterious working of wood. Does nature's vast ticking require design? This is the biggest question science or science fiction can ask.

Modern physics and biology converge to a single answer about the identity of the missing watchmaker: it was chance, all along, and blind chance at that. "The essence of life is statistical improbability on a colossal scale," as Richard Dawkins, author of

The Blind Watchmaker, concludes after 300 pages of detailed study of how enormous order can build up from microscopic randomness. (The old SF answer, that maybe life was brought here from elsewhere, simply displaces the problem to some earlier origin.)

"Cumulative selection, by slow and gradual degrees," not a single, brilliant leap from blindness to razor-sharp resolution, made such wonders as the eye ("invented" independently several times). Evolution made millions of tiny steps, each one conferring a minutely added advantage to its bearer. Huge changes were enormously unlikely. "The same applies to the odds against the spontaneous existence of any fully fashioned, perfect and whole beings, including — I see no way of avoiding the conclusion — deities."

Arriving at a theory of processes unseen in a mere human lifetime demands careful study, as Dawkins shows in clear, no-nonsense exposition (for which he won the *Los Angeles Times*' award for nonfiction). The trouble is that our everyday notions of likeliness are wildly wrong. "Our well-tuned apparatus of skepticism and subjective probability-theory misfires by huge margins, because it is tuned — ironically, by evolution itself — to work within a lifetime of a few decades."

Can random processes truly fashion such order? The Newtonian universe of deterministic, objective data had no assigned arrow of time; its equations could just as easily run forward as in reverse. If you knew everything at one instant, you could predict all before and after; the present contained both future and past. Planets glided serenely forward to predictable positions, and just as certainly historians

could find out when eclipses occurred in ancient Egypt. This Godlike knowledge was a facet of certain kinds of differential equations, using information often not available in the real world. (It also accounts for some of the cocksureness in technophile SF, I suspect. We know how the world works, Heinlein told us often in the 1940s and 1950s.)

But nineteenth-century physics introduced entropy, and the certainty that orbits decay. Our present communications satellites feel a faint brush of upper atmosphere and inevitably turn into meteors.

Readers accustomed to seeing chance equated with inevitable entropy increase, the eventual heat death of the universe, and other pessimistic images will find in *Order out of Chaos* a startlingly different vision.

Physics has begun to explore the dynamics of the true, turbulent world, which "appears as irregular or chaotic on the macroscopic scale," but is "highly organized on the microscopic scale. The multiple space and time scales involved in turbulence correspond to the coherent behavior of millions and millions of molecules."

Suppose, passing through the green wood, you spy the smooth surface of a slow stream. An obstruction will make small whorls peel away from its edges, as laminar flow turns to vortex motion. You see the small swirling depressions refract light, waltzing downstream to their own dynamic harmony. The uninteresting, steady stream now has deep, complex structures — order built up from the apparently bland flow.

A more striking example is the Benard instability, created by heating a beaker of viscous liquid from below. At low heat the liquid sits still. Keep turning the heat up, and suddenly slow-churning currents move vertical-

ly, carrying heat faster. The entire vessel is now a concert of circulating structures. The onset point and size of the churning cells are quite predictable. Contrary to usual notions of entropy, the highly ordered state comes as entropy increases.

These are examples of self-organization in nature, processes beyond the crystalline static view of the Newtonian age. The cells are "dissipative structures" that support themselves by dissipating a smooth flow of available energy. They arise in conditions far from equilibrium, as microscopic fluctuations are amplified above many other "equally possible" paths.

That nature inherently prefers self-organization is a startling revelation to neo-Newtonians. As Prigogine and Stengers discuss in broad detail, the older view of stability, uniformity and equilibrium, within closed systems and linear relationships, describes little of nature. The Prigoginian paradigm (which won its creator a Nobel Prize in Physics) mirrors our century: disequilibrium, nonlinear relationships, small inputs triggering massive consequences. Market crashes, the abrupt transformation following new technology such as the microchip, the atom bomb, or the personal computer — we have gotten used to historical lurches.

The paradigm extends even to pulsars, where streams of electrons and their antiparticles, positrons, jet outward. Though electrons are at first smoothly distributed, Peter Goldreich of CalTech (and later myself) was able to show that subtle forces make the electrons seek each other, bunching. The positrons bunch up, too. This forces them to radiate electromagnetic waves many billions of times more powerfully than they ordinarily would, and this makes them visible to radio

telescopes on Earth. These self-organized bunches dissipate their flowing energy more rapidly, but they inherently "prefer" matters that way.

Such a pervasive tendency to self-organize suggests that life (that is, self-reproducing structures of considerable complexity) might arise in vastly differing climes. The surfaces of stars, say, where the ordering mechanism is strong magnetic fields. Or perhaps even stranger places, like molecular clouds or the accretion disks around black holes. Science fiction could profitably speculate about this with Prigogine's views in mind.

These pictures come from a new brand of physics that resolutely refuses to consider isolated systems and faces the fact that nearly all of nature inevitably interlinks. This view can be visionary in its complexity; farewell to those who would make mere meteorology of sunsets, and botany of blossoms.

Mechanistic, clockwork models alienated many in the nineteenth century. SF, when it sticks to such pictures, alienates many. Mankind has had to "choose between the reassuring but irrational temptation to seek in nature a guarantee of human values, or a sign pointing to a fundamental correlatedness, and fidelity to a rationality that isolates him in a silent world." For most people it has been far easier to believe that God's hand shaped the world as a vessel for us. Classical science's cool reason often seemed to them as simply indifferent, or even as worshipful of a universe of mere blind matter. Now, a more interactive physics can soften this classic dichotomy, though it still has no room for a watchmaker.

Evolutionary physics also has a place for isolated systems that devolve, following the classic entropy increase.

But the exciting truths come from a view of our present state as the outcome of self-organizing processes that began long ago and persist. Once the conditions of energy flow exist, life itself may be a rapid consequence; the first rock formations, reflecting a steady geological condition, appeared at about the same time as life, 3.8 billion years ago.

We personally sense irreversibility through our blunt mortality. Why does God let His universe decay?

The Newtonian universe of rigid, isolated systems alarmed many at an unconscious level, since its God was indeed a distant, unsensed presence. Did our personal decay mean anything against this tapestry of crystalline order? This led many to read deity into design, arguing since the time of Thomas Aquinas that the entire universe is essentially a found golden watch.

What's the SF view of such matters? Well, God certainly plays no role in most of our work. But more deeply, I feel we too often go for simple, mechanical views of how the rich world functions. Seldom do we see well-worked-out biospheres, as in Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean*, which does convey a feel for the emergent possibilities in the organic world, backed by accurate scientific lore. Too often in SF, classic Earth Mothers purvey their mystic insights in opposition to stiff, semi-militaristic starship captains — both sides representing falsifications of how humanism and science view the world.

But should we even count God Himself out? Some of the best SF has dealt with the science-fictional implications of God's existence. Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* and George Zebrowski's *Omega Point* share a longing for transcendence that makes

scientific sense — rather a tall order, but SF principally among literatures *should* be ambitious, after all. James Blish's *A Case of Conscience*, a fine novel, deals with intricate theological implications. But what about expressly writing SF about how to find God?

Try John Updike's *Roger's Version*. It's an embarrassment to the SF field — we should have produced work at this level, about such deep and science-fictional issues.

Roger's Version takes up many of Updike's familiar themes against a backdrop of modern physical theory. It traces the rummaging of Roger Lambert, a fifty-three-year-old divinity professor, for a response to a Young Turk's empirical theology. His opponent, Dale Kohler, asserts that the extraordinary fine-tuned details of nature are mute clues to a guiding hand.

Kohler's case rests on intriguing facts. Nuclear constants, if changed a mere few per cent, would make stars like our own only fleetingly stable. Tinkering even slightly with atomic ratios would sunder all complex molecules that could sustain life. We are surrounded by a delicately set frame of conditions, like an oil painting held by spider webs.

On the cosmological scale, there are puzzling numerical coincidences. The ratio of electric and gravitational forces between the fundamental units of atomic matter, the electron and the proton, is about 10^{40} . So is the ratio of the time light takes to cross the universe to the time taken to cross an atom. The number of protons in the universe is just about the square of this number, 10^{80} .

Physicists have fretted over such possibly meaningful coincidences for half a century. In *Roger's Version* Dale Kohler intends to prove that God has

left His fingerprints on the universe, like a forgetful cosmic carpenter. This is science fiction with true hubris about it.

Kohler argues that mathematics and computers can now model everything so well that God cannot remain hidden any longer. "A tree, like a craggy mountain or a Gothic cathedral, exhibits the quality of 'scaling' — its parts tend to repeat in their various scales the same forms." He uses the latest complex computer codes to strip away reality and unmask God through circuitry, where "in the microscopic maze where a single fleck of fallen dust would block a passage like a boulder and the finest hair come crashing down like a cathedral beam, he is drawing closer to the dragon, to the fire-breathing secret."

But Roger isn't having any of this. He clings to an impersonal God who maintains majestic tact and covers his tracks. Updike gives Roger gorgeous visions of adulterous liaisons between Dale and both Roger's wife and his niece, lush scenes that are consistent with the facts of the objective narrative but may be wholly imagined. In this way he parallels the entire problem with the argument from design that plagued even Aquinas — how do you know you're not just projecting your own desire for perceived meaning? How much numerical coincidence convinces? Later, the pregnant niece provides evidence of *someone's* passions. But the father could be Roger himself, snared in a devil-may-care moment.

In the end, Roger doesn't know with certainty that he is a cuckold. Neither does Dale know if God gives an occasional wink and nod. Parallel uncertainties stretch like deterministic railroad tracks into the infinite perspective, where they may only appear

to meet.

Updike seems to offer a God who immerses us not in mute proofs, but in the experience of participating in the universe's evolution. As usual, sex and morality are flip sides of the same philosophical coin: "It's a grand surprise nature has cooked up for us, love with its accelerated pulse rate and its drastic overestimation of the love object, its rhythmic build-up and discharge; but then that's it, there isn't another such treat life can offer, unless you count contract bridge and death."

Updike's Barthian God is the great Other, finally unknowable except through His word; proofs and clues are irrelevant. This God is finally more musty metaphor than deity. He does not seem to participate in the universe, and so reminds physicists of a kind of Newtonian God, having deliberately removed Himself from our isolated and entropic-bound system. Or perhaps in the pervasive phenomenon of dissipating, self-organizing systems we see some deeper clue? In the end, there is a science-fictional link to Updike's work, a sense that reason and science can respond to our need for transcendence.

Why hasn't recent SF echoed the sense of process that is emerging in even the hardest of the physical sciences?

Why didn't an SF author take up the issues in *Roger's Version*?

I suspect there are two forces at work. First, the world is playing our game more often now. Speculation is more permissible in the sciences; so often, those who dared grandly were those who reached the summit first, ahead of the plodders. Scientists are extending their reach and their grasp.

Second, though, we writers may be doing less homework. *Roger's Version*

is a rebuke to us all. These ideas were lying around for the last decade, and I can't remember a single SF story about them. Yet they address the single biggest question of all. When I started reading Updike's stylish, thoughtful work, I was chagrined at the opportunity I'd missed.

When I scan the SF section in bookstores, I find a lot of work that seems to treat the props of the genre —

spaceships, robots, desolated apocalyptic landscapes, time travel — as mere background elements for fast-paced adventure or romance. *Worlds of Wonder* shows, perhaps unintentionally, that the genre wasn't always that way. We may have been poor then, sure, but we were quick, crafty, and did our homework.

Maybe we should start hitting the books again. •



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THE SANDS OF MARS

I've looked upon the sands of Mars
and seen where rivers once did flow,
and I am sure that there was life
perhaps remaining now below
the billowing dunes the surface shape,
so I must wonder and surmise
that once some beings there did rape
their planet — for we do likewise!
Then for them came a fatal day
the plundered planet'd not support
their life form which had caused dismay,
and they, an act of last resort,
aimed all their ships into the void,
but God commanded all destroyed!

— Buck Allen



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SANCTUARY
by James Lawson
art: John Lakey





James Lawson grew up in California and has a College Teaching Certificate in Communications Arts and Printing. After traveling extensively on work for the U.S. Army, where he worked directly with two lieutenant colonels, he left the military. He is currently a government consultant.

As a sideline, he has done technical research for a well-known SF writer. In the course of his research, he discovered the cyberpunk movement. Though he has published other work, this is his first novella-length science-fiction story.

Lawson is married, and he and his wife have dedicated themselves to raising six orphans of multiple ancestry.

"Hey, Cardenas, don't you retire today, man?"

"Chief's got it in for you sure today."

"Naw, he's gonna fire Cardenas and promote the dog!"

He smiled as he walked past their desks, the laughter lapping against him in friendly, cool waves before falling away behind him. Occasionally he replied, brief verbal jousts with those he knew well that left no one injured. He always gave as good as he got. When you were the oldest sergeant on the force, not to mention the smallest, you had to expect a certain amount of ribbing.

"Don't sweat it, Charliebo," he told his companion. "Good boy."

At the mention of his name the German shepherd's ears cocked forward, and he looked up curiously. Same old Charliebo. The laughter didn't bother him. Nothing bothered him. That's how he'd been trained, and the years hadn't changed him.

We're both getting old, Cardenas thought. Jokes now, but in another year or two they'll make me hang it up no matter what. Then we double the time in front of the video, hoh. Just you and me and the ol' TV, dog. Maybe that's not such a bad idea. We could both use some rest. Though he had a hunch the chief hadn't called him in to talk about rest.

A visitor might've found the big dog's presence in the ready room unusual, but not the Nogales cops. The dog had been Sergeant Cardenas's shadow for twelve years. For the first six, he'd also been his eyes. Eyes which had been taken from him by a frightened nineteen-year-old ninloco Cardenas had surprised in the process of rotoing an autofill outside a Tucson hydro station. Pocket change. Pill credit.

Cardenas and his partner had slipped up on the kid without expecting anything more lethal than some angry words. The ninloco had grabbed his pants and extracted an Ithaca spitter. The high-pocket twenty-gauge shattered Cardenas's partner and made jelly of the sergeant's face. Backup told him that the ninloco had gone down giggling when they'd finally excreted

him. His blood analysis showed .12 spacebase and an endorphin-based expander. He was so high he should have flown away. Now he was a memory.

The surgeons plastered Cardenas's face back together. The drooping mustache regrew in sections. When he was recovered enough to comprehend what had happened to him, they gave him Charliebo, a one-year-old intense-trained shepherd, the best guide dog the school had. For six years Charliebo had been Cardenas's eyes.

Then the biosurges figured out a way to transplant optic nerves as well as just the eyeballs, and they'd coaxed him back into the hospital. When he was discharged four months later, he was seeing through the bright perfect blue eyes of a dead teenager named Anise Dorleac whose boyfriend had turned him and her both to ground chuck while drag racing a Lotusette at a hundred and ninety on Interstate Forty up near Flag. Not much salvageable out of either of them except her eyes. They'd given them to Cardenas.

After that, Charliebo didn't have to be his eyes anymore. Six years, though, an animal becomes something more than a pet and less than a person. Despite the entreaties of the guide-dog school, Cardenas wouldn't give him up. Couldn't. He'd never married, no kids, and Charliebo was all the family he'd ever had. You didn't give up family.

The police association stood by him. The school directors grumbled but didn't press the matter. Besides, it was pretty funny, wasn't it? What could be more outré than a short, aging, blue-eyed Tex-Mex cop who worked his terminal with a dog guarding his wastepaper basket? So they left him alone. More importantly, they left him Charliebo.

He didn't pause outside the one-way plastic door. Pangborn had told him to come right in. He thumbed a contact switch and stepped through as the plastic slid aside.

The chief didn't even glance at Charliebo. The shepherd was an appendage of the sergeant, a canine extrusion of Cardenas's personality. Cardenas wouldn't have looked right without the dog to balance him. Without having to be told, the shepherd lay down silently at the foot of Cardenas's chair, resting his angular gray head on his forepaws.

"*Cómo se happening, Nick?*"

The chief smiled thinly. "*De nada, Angel. You?*"

"Same old this and that. I think we wormed a line on the chopshop down in Nayarit."

"Forget it. I'm taking you off that."

Cardenas's hand fell to stroke Charliebo's neck. The dog didn't move, but his eyes closed in pleasure. "I got eighteen months before mandatory retirement. You pasturing me early?"

"Not a chance." Pangborn understood. The chief had five years left before they'd kick him out. "Got some funny stuff going on over in Agua Pri. Lieutenant there, Danny Mendez, is an old friend of mine. They're oiled and it's getting uncomfortable. Some real specific gravity on their

backs. So he called for help. I told him I'd loan over the best intuit in the Southwest. We both know who that is."

Cardenas turned and made an exaggerated search of the duty room outside. Pangborn smiled.

"Why not send one of the young hotshots? Why me?"

"Because you're still the best, you old fart. You know why."

Sure, he knew why. Because he'd gone six years without eyes and in that time he'd developed the use of his other senses to the opto. Involuntary training, but unsurpassingly effective. Then they'd given him back his sight. Of course, he was the best. But he still liked to hear it. At his age compliments of any kind were few and far between, scattered widely among the ocean of jokes.

Under his caressing fingers Charliebo stretched delightedly. "So what's skewed in Agua Pri?"

"Two designers. Wallace Crescent and a Vladimir Noschek. First one they called Wondrous Wallace. I dunno what they called the other guy, except irreplaceable. Crescent was the number one mainline man for GenDyne. Noschek worked for Parabas S.A."

"Also mainline design?" Pangborn nodded. "Qué about them?"

"Crescent two weeks ago. Noschek right afterward. Each of them wiped clean as a kid's Etch-a-Sketch. Hollow, vacuumed right back through childhood. Both of them lying on an office couch, relaxed — Crescent with a drink half-finished, Noschek working on a bowl of pistachios. Like they'd been working easy, normal, then suddenly they ain't at home anymore. That was weird enough."

"Something was weirder?"

Pangborn looked uneasy. That was unusual. It took a lot of specific gravity to upset the chief. He'd been a sparkler buster down Guyamas way. Everybody knew about the Tampolobampo massacre. Late night and the runners had buffooned into an ambush laid by local spitters trying to pull a rip-off. By the time the cops arrived from halfway across Sonora and Sinaloa, the beach was covered with guts the waves washed in and out like spawning grunion. Through it all Pangborn hadn't blinked, not even when older cops were heaving their insides all over the Golfo California. He'd just gone along the waterline, kicking pieces of bodies aside, looking for evidence to implicate the few survivors. It was an old story that never got old. Decaders liked to lay it on rookies to see how green they'd get.

But there was no record of Pangborn looking uneasy.

"Nobody can figure out how they died, Angel. Parabas flew their own specialists up from São Paulo. Elpaso Juarez coroner's office still won't acknowledge the certification because they can't list ceeohdee. Both bodies were clean as the inside of both brains. No juice, no soft intrusions, no toxins, nothing. Bare as Old Mother Hubbard's cupboard. Inviolate, the reports said. Hell, how do you kill somebody without intruding? Even ultra-

sound leaves a signature. But according to Mendez, there wasn't a damn thing wrong with either man except nobody was home."

"Motives?"

Pangborn grunted. "Tired of small talk? Working already?"

"Aren't I?"

The chief scrolled crunch on his desk screen, muting the audio. "Money, shematics, razzmatazz, who knows? Parabas and GenDyne Internal Security immediately went over homes, friends, and work stations with good suction. Nothing missing, everything in place. Both men were straight right up and down the lifeline. No Alley-Oops. GenDyne's frizzing the whole Southwest Enforcement Region. They want to know how as much as why. They also want to know if anybody's going to be next. Bad for morale, bad for business." He scratched at his prosthetic left ear. The real one had been chewed off by a ninloco ten years ago, and the replacement never seemed to quite fit.

Cardenas was quiet for a long moment. "What do you think?"

Pangborn shrugged. "Somebody vacuums two mainline designers after penetrating state-of-the-art corporate security but doesn't steal anything insofar as anybody can tell. Both work files were checked. Both are regularly monitored, and everything was solid. So nobody did it to steal crunch. Just a whim, but I think maybe it was somehow personal. Not corporate at all. You can't tell that to GenDyne or Parabas. They don't like to hear that kind of stuff."

"You'd expect them to go paranoid. Any connections between the two men?"

"Not that Mendez and his people have been able to find. Didn't eat at the same restaurants, moved in different circles entirely. Crescent was married, one wife, family. Noschek was younger, a loner. Separate orbits, separate obits. Me, I think maybe they were flooded with a new kind of juice. Maybe involuntarily."

"No evidence for that, and it still doesn't give us a motive."

Pangborn stared at him. "Find one."

Cardenas was at home in the Strip, a solid string of high tech that ran all the way from LaLa to East Elpaso Juarez. It followed the old and frayed USA-Mehico border with less regard for actual national boundaries than the Rio Grande. Every multinational that wanted a piece of the Namerica market had plants there, and most had several. In between were kilometers of upstarts, some true independents, others intrapreneurs spun off by the electronic gargantuas. Down amidst the frenzy of innovation, where bright new developments could be outdated before they could be brought to market, fortunes were risked and lost. If you were a machinist, a mask sculptor, or a programmer, you could make six figures a year. If you were a peon from Zacatecas or Tamulipas, a dirt farmer made extinct by new tech, or a refugee

from the infinite slums of Mexico City, you could always find work on the assembly lines. Someday if you worked hard and didn't lose your eyesight to overstrain, they might give you a white lab coat and hat and promote you to a clean room. Kids, women, anybody who could control their fingers and their eyes could make hard currency in the Montezuma Strip, where First World technology locked hands with Third World cheap labor.

Spin-offs from the Strip extended north to Phoenix, south to Guyamas. Money brought in subcultures, undercultures, anticultures. Some of the sociologists who delved into the underpinnings of the Strip didn't come out. The engineers and technocrats forced to live in proximity to their labor and produce lived in fortified suburbs and traveled to work in armored transports. Cops in transit didn't rate private vehicles.

Cardenas squeezed into a crowded induction shuttle bound for Agua Prieta. The plastic car stank of sweat, disinfectant, Tex-Mex fast food. Other passengers grudgingly made way for Charliebo, but not for his owner. The dog wouldn't take up a seat.

Cardenas found one anyway, settled in for the hour-long rock-and-ride. Advertising bubbled from the overhead speakers, behind spider steel grates. A ninloco tried to usurp Cardenas's seat. He wore his hair long and slick. The Aztec snake tattooed on his right cheek twitched its coils when he grinned. Cardenas saw him coming but didn't meet his eyes, hoping he'd just bounce on past. The other commuters gave the crazyboy plenty of room. He came straight up to Cardenas.

"No spitting, Tio. Just evaporate, bien?"

Cardenas glanced up at him. "Waft, child."

The ninloco's gaze narrowed. When Cardenas tensed, Charliebo came up off the floor and growled. He was an old dog and he had big teeth. The ninloco backed up a step and reached toward a pocket.

"Leave it, leave you." Cardenas shook his head warily, holding up his right arm so the sleeve slid back. The ninloco's eyes flicked over the bright blue bracelet with its gleaming LEDs.

"Federale. Hey, I didn't know, compadre. I'll jojobar."

"You do that." Cardenas lowered his hand. The crazyboy vanished back into the crowd. Charliebo grunted and settled back on his haunches.

Surprised at the tightness in his gut, Cardenas leaned back against the curved plastic and went through a series of relaxation breathing exercises. This ninloco wasn't the one who'd flayed him years ago. He was a newer, younger clone, no better and no worse. A member of the hundreds of gangs that broke apart and coalesced as they drifted through the length of the Strip like sargassum weed in the mid-Atlantic. The ninocos hated citizens, but they despised each other.

Across the aisle two teenage girls, one Anglo and the other Spanglo, continued to stare at him. Only they weren't seeing him, he knew, but rather the vits playing across the interior lenses of the oversized glasses they wore.

The arms of each set of lenses curved down behind their ears to drive the music home by direct transduction, straight to the inner ear. Cardenas didn't mind the music, but the vibrations were something else.

By the time the induction car pulled into Agua Pri station, he'd completely forgotten the confrontation with the ninloco.

The flashman at GenDyne would've taken him through the whole damn plant if Cardenas hadn't finally insisted on being shown Crescent's office. It wasn't his escort's fault. A flashman just naturally tried to promote and show-off his company at every opportunity. Wasn't that what sales-pr was all about? Even the police departments engaged flashmen. If you didn't have a professional to intercede for you with the media, they'd eat you alive.

That didn't mean you had to like them, and most people didn't. Cardenas thought they were one with the lizards that still scuttled across the rocks north and south of the Strip.

The GenDyne think tank was built like a fortress. In point of fact, it was a fortress, the architecture inspired by Assyrian fortifications unearthed in Mesopotamia. Only instead of stone, it rose from the desert whose sand it crowded onto on foundations of reinforced concrete. Its walls were bronze glass set in casements of white high-construct plastic. It was built on the southern edge of this part of the Strip, so the south-facing alcoves and offices all had views of once-hostile terrain. Expensive real estate. This was a place for a multinational's pets, its most privileged people. Designers and engineers, who conjured money out of nothing.

Crescent had been important enough to rate a top-floor work station, right up there with the modem mongers who swapped info and crunch with the home office in LaLa. Through the window that dominated one wall could be seen the smog-shrouded heights of the Sierra de la Madera. Like a python dressed for Christmas, the arc of the Strip curved around toward Laguna de Guzman and the new arcomplex of Ciudad Pershing-Villa.

The office itself had been furnished professionally. Thick, comfortable chairs, a cabinet containing ice maker and drink dispenser, indirect lighting, everything designed to produce a work environment conducive to the sort of brainstorms that added fractions to a multinat's listing on the International Exchange. An expensive colorcrawl by an artist Cardenas didn't recognize lit the wall behind the couch, two square meters of half-sentient neon gone berserk. The pale orange and brown earth-tone carpet underfoot was thicker than the upholstery on his furniture back in Nogales. It smelled of new-mown hay and damp sandstone, having been sense-recharged not more than a week ago. To cover the smell of death? But Crescent's passing had been neat. As the flashman spieled on, Cardenas studied the couch where the body had been found, calm and unstressed.

The desk was a sweep of replicant mesquite, complete to the detailed grain. The east wall was, of course, all screen. It was just a flat beige surface

now, powered down.

"It's been scanned, scraped, and probed, but nothing except the, uh, body's been moved." The flashman finally saw him staring at the couch. The death frame. He wore a metallic green suit with short sleeves. The set of red lenses swathed his eyes. The other two primaries were pushed back atop his head, bracketed by the high blond crewcut. A hearsee stuck out of his right ear like a burrowing beetle. His green shoes were soled in teflink, and he slid noiselessly across the carpet without slipping. Lizard, Cardenas thought.

Ignoring the mute workscreen, Cardenas strolled behind the desk. A couple of holos drifted a centimeter above the replicant wood, off to the left. He'd only been able to see them from the back. They were set to rotate every half-hour. They showed a pretty young woman, two kids. The boy and girl were also pretty. Everyone smiled warmly. Crescent was in one of the holos. Images of a happy, content family on its way up. Soaring, if Crescent was half as brilliant as GenDyne's files had led him to believe.

In his mind's eye he conjured up the coroner's vit of the victim, the designer sitting placidly on the couch, his body undamaged, heart pumping steadily. The eyes staring but not seeing because everything behind them that had been Wallace Crescent had been removed. This space for rent.

Who would do that to a man who, according to every record, had no enemies, had never bothered a soul, wanted nothing but to succeed at his job and take care of his handsome family? Cardenas felt sick. Nearby, Charliebo whined, gazing up at his two-legged friend out of brown, limpid eyes.

The flashman's lenses dropped. "Something new? I know they used to train them to sniff juice, but that was a long time ago."

"Just a friend." Cardenas spoke absently, still inspecting the couch. "That's where they found him?"

The flashman flipped up his reds. His eyes were pale, weak. Spent too much time relying on the lenses, Cardenas thought. No wonder he needed triples.

"Right there, on the middle cushion. Could've been sleeping except that his eyes were wide open."

Cardenas nodded and walked over to run his fingers over the upholstery. No blood, no signs of any kind. So sayeth the Official Inquiry. If it had been otherwise, they wouldn't have called for help. He straightened and strolled back to sit behind the desk. Hydraulics cushioned his weight, all but silent. Crescent's body was being kept alive in a Douglas hospital. The family insisted on it, hoping against hope he'd return some day from wherever he'd gone. They hadn't listened to the police. Crescent hadn't *gone*. He'd been moved out forcibly. There was nothing to come back. But the family wouldn't listen. Gradually, the police stopped bothering them.

What had happened to this stable, incisive, innovative mind?

He let his fingers slide along the top of the desk until he found what he

was searching for. A center drawer snapped open. He ignored the printouts, storage cubes, miscellanea, and picked up the vorec. Small, the very latest model, a Gevic Puretone-20. It was slim and smooth, the size of a small hot dog, no bun. Twiddling it between thumb and fingers, he slowly turned in the chair until he was facing the workscreen wall. He flicked a tiny button set in the polished metal surface. The east wall lit with a soft light. A barely perceptible hum filled the office.

The flashman took a nervous step toward the desk. "You can't do that."

Cardenas spared him a sideways glance. "I have to. I have to know what he was working on when he was vacuumed."

"I'll need to get you clearance. You can't open the Box without clearance."

Cardenas grinned at him. "Want to bet?"

"Wait." The flashman was backing toward the door. "Please, just wait a moment." He hurried out.

The sergeant hesitated, continued to play with the vorec mike. Charliebo stared eagerly at the wall. He knew what was coming. This was something Cardenas did frequently. So far as he knew, the dog enjoyed it as much as he did. Whether he was rummaging through a personal Box or a much larger one holding company records, it was always interesting to examine the contents. The mike in his hand was cool to the touch, uncontaminated.

The flashman came back with someone in tow. She didn't look pleased.

"Company policy. We need someone equally capable of interpreting data present when you go in." So we're sure you don't pocket anything on the side, was the unspoken corollary. "Senior Designer Hypatia Spango, this is Sergeant Angel Cardenas. He's over from Nogales to work on —"

"I know what he's here to work on. Why else would anyone be in Wally's office?" She stared evenly at him.

Straight on, Cardenas noted. No flinching, no deference, certainly no worry. She was at least fifteen years younger than he. Handsome, not pretty. Black hair permed in tight ringlets that fell to her shoulders. Black eyes too, but oddly pale skin. Body voluptuous beneath the white corporate jumpsuit. Mature. He wondered how much of her was held up by polymers and how much by herself. She was taller than he, but it would've been unusual if she wasn't. Everybody was taller than he was. She wore a reducer cap over her right eye. When she saw him looking at it, she removed it and dropped it into a pocket. Three chevrons on each sleeve of the jumpsuit. The woman carried some weight, and not just in her pants.

Well, they wouldn't set a post-grad scanner to keep watch on him.

Reluctantly, she advanced until she was standing on the other side of the desk. Then she noticed the gray-black lump near his feet. "Nice dog."

"That's Charliebo. He's nicer than most people."

"Look, I didn't want to do this, but they insisted Optop. I don't want to like you either, but you've got a dog, so I guess I'm stuck there, too." She

extended a hand across the desk top. Her grip was firm and full, not the half-dance tentativeness favored by most women. Her nails were cut short and clean, no polish, none of the rainbow insets currently in fashion. Soft but efficient. Working hands.

"You from around here?" He meant the Strip.

She shook her head tersely. The ringlets jangled silently. If they'd been made of metal, there would have been music. "Iowa. Des Moines. It's a long story."

"Aren't they all, *verdad*?" He sat up straight and looked past her. "You can go now."

The flashman licked his lips as he fiddled with his lenses. They dehumanized him, if it was possible to dehumanize a flashman further. "I should stay."

Spango turned. "Waft."

He did.

She sat down without being asked, pulling one of the chairs up to the other side of the desk.

"How long have you been with GenDyne?" he asked her.

"Is this being recorded?"

He tapped his breast pocket. "*Everything's* being recorded."

She sighed. "All my life. Univ in Des Moines, then three years graduate work. Vegas School of Design. Then GenDyne. Five promotions and two husbands along the way. Kept the promotions, lost the husbands." A shrug. "That's life. All of mine, anyway."

"And how long's that?"

A slightly wicked smile. "I'm not sure that information's pertinent to your investigation here, *Federale*."

It was his turn to grin. "All right. Pax. How long did you know Crescent?"

"Ten years. All of it off and on. You know designers. We spend most of our time inside the Box. Wally was friendly enough, knew everybody, and they knew him. Except I don't guess anybody really *knew* him. His wife, Karen, a real quiet, sweet gal. They made all the company picnics, reward trips; for all the expected functions, they were both there. Wally played high goal on the division socball team."

"Ever notice anything that would make you think he was an abuser?"

She shook her head. "As far as I knew, he was clean as the Box Room. Of course, you never know what anybody does in private."

"No, you don't. How good was he?"

"As a designer? The best. Wally knew how to use imagination *and* logic. He had a flair most of us don't, no matter how long we work at it. Talent, you know? I don't know what else to call it. He knew the inside of the Box the way most of us know our own bodies."

"GenDyne knew it, too. The rest of us had to beg for a raise or an extra

day off. All Crescent had to do was sneeze, and he'd have the whole marketing department cleaning his shoes with their tongues. Are you familiar with the GS Capacitate?" Cardenas nodded. "That was Crescent's baby. Sensitized microbio circuit. Plug one into your screen, feed it, and it automatically replicates existing storage until you turn off the power. Gallium arsenide proteins are a lot cheaper in bulk than predesigned slabs. Revolutionized peripheral information storage."

Cardenas was impressed. "Crescent came up with that?" She nodded. "So obviously money wasn't a problem for him."

Spango leaned back in her chair. For a big woman she had small feet, he mused. "He wasn't independently wealthy, but he made more than you or I'll ever see."

"Maybe he was on to something new. Something potentially as big as the GS."

"If so, he was keeping it to himself. We couldn't find anything revolutionary in his section of the Box. Of course, Crescent was a genius. The rest of us are just plodders. It could still be in there, tucked away where nobody but Wally himself could find it."

"Isn't that kind of unusual?"

"I see what you're thinking. Not only isn't it unusual, it's standard policy. The company understands and accepts it. I do it myself. Hey, if you don't protect your ideas from your good compadre next door, next thing you know he's accessed your storage and is presenting your hard-won innovation to the Board. How do you prove you thought of it first? It's tough to ident an idea."

"So there's serious competition even within a division. You sure he wasn't planning to sell to somebody else?"

"Outside GenDyne? How the hell would I know that? How would anybody? Is that what you think?"

"Right now I'm thinking of everything. You say he had plenty of money. But he wasn't independent. Maybe some other outfit was willing to set him up for life. Maybe he wanted something GenDyne couldn't or wouldn't get for him. Something nobody else knew about. Got nervous, changed his mind, I don't know. The people he was dealing with got angry. They argued, they sent someone in after him, they vacuumed him to get what they wanted. No such thing as selective vacuuming, of course. Not yet. Not that the type of person another corporation would send to do something like that would care. Why leave a witnessing consciousness around to make noise afterward?"

"You make a good case, but I think it's all idletime. You didn't know Wally Crescent. Subside dealings weren't his style."

"People are full of surprises." He twirled the vorec. "Time to start digging."

She turned to face the wallscreen. "GenDyne Security's already combed

his storage. Nothing but what you'd expect. You won't find anything either."

"Maybe not, but I've got to start someplace. You want to give me the access, or you want to make me work?"

Those deep black eyes studied him. "Maybe I'll get you to work some other time. You've already got the access."

He smiled. "What makes you think that?"

"Security wouldn't have asked you to look around without giving it to you. Without access, there wouldn't be anything for you to look at. And if I knew it, then I'd be a suspect, wouldn't I?"

"You're a suspect already. Everyone in this building's a suspect."

She sniffed. "Can I stay and watch?"

He shrugged. "This kind of examination can get pretty dull. Looking for useful concepts to swipe?"

"If there was anything readily extractable in there worth stealing, Security's done it already."

He nodded and turned to face the blank wall, raising his voice recognition mike to his lips. "Coordinate Hapsburg Hohenzollern Mermaid."

The wall seemed to disappear. He was looking across the carpet down an infinite rectangular tunnel. Within the tunnel, tiny flecks of light and color swarmed like protozoa in pond water. As he stared, the flecks began to coalesce to form a simple holographic square, neatly lettered on all six sides. A musical female voice, the synthesized duplicate of a reconstructed nineteenth-century singer known as the Swedish Nightingale, spoke from concealed speakers.

"Welcome to the GenDyne Box, Mermaid storage and files. You are not Wallace Crescent."

"Federales Security Special Forces Bomo Bomo Six." Cardenas withdrew a plastic card from a shirt pocket and slipped it into a receptacle in the side of the desk.

"Welcome Sergeant Cardenas. Security clearance processed. Mermaid awaits."

Cardenas frowned. "That was too easy."

"Not if Crescent had nothing to hide. I told you company security's already run this. Mermaid let them go anywhere they wanted to. If Wally'd been hiding something, they would've found a block."

"Maybe not, if this guy was as clever as you say. What better way to hide something than to let everybody look around for it?"

"You mean like hide it in plain sight? You can't do that in a Box. If Crescent had tucked something into a seam, Security would've smelled it out even if they couldn't crack it. Besides, Crescent didn't design for Security. He was strictly heavy-duty industrial."

"How do you know what Crescent was and wasn't into?"

She had no reply for that.

He started in. He was methodical, efficient, experienced, able to skip whole blocks of information without so much as a surface scan. He pumped the vorec up to three times normal speed. It impressed Spango, though that wasn't his intention. That was just the way he worked. Within GenDyne itself, nobody except the vorec designers worked even double speed.

Sometimes he switched to printout when he wanted to be sure of something, reading the words as they formed in the void created by the screen, but most of the time he stuck with the faster vorec. Much of the time he kept his eyes closed as the *Mermaid* storage spoke to him. He did it because it helped his concentration. He was used to analyzing without being able to see. What he couldn't detect with his eyes shut was Hypatia watching him.

Not so very long ago, people had wasted time tapping out their commands on keyboards. Nobody used keyboards anymore except hobbyists. With the perfection of voice recognition circuitry, you just talked to your Box and it replied in a voice of your choice. A whole industry had been created just to supply custom voices. Your Box could reply in the measured tones of Winston Churchill, Shiela Armstrong, or even Adolph Hitler. Or your dead father. Or your favorite seamyvit star.

He probed and dug and inquired without wondering who might be listening in. He took it for granted this room was smothered. GenDyne Security would've seen to that.

Mermaid was stuffed with notions, ideas incomplete, concepts partly rounded, files that dead-ended, rotating neural highways, and biochem cylinders. Most of it was far above a cop's venue, but so far he hadn't encountered anything he couldn't recognize as incomplete. Even so, he found himself glad they'd pushed Hypatia on him. If anything slipped past his notice, she'd pin it for him. He didn't have to ask. Having been allowed to see another designer's private sanctum, she was studying eagerly. But so far she gave no indication they'd stumbled into anything unusual or out of the ordinary.

Nothing worth vacuuming a man for.

"Hey?"

"Hmmm?"

"C'mon, Cardenas. Give it a rest. You're starting to put down roots."

He blinked. He hadn't been asleep, not really. Just dozing, his mind lazy and open to the steady flow of verbosity from the wall. He sat up and saw Charliebo resting his head in her lap. A glance the other way showed it was dark outside. He checked his bracelet. Tiny lights flashed accusingly at him. It was after nine. He'd been sponging for eight straight hours.

"I'm not tired."

"The hell you're not."

Slowly, he eased out of the chair. His muscles protested. His bladder was tight as a slipknot.

"Where's the —?"

"Down the hall." She stood, grinning at him. "Come on, I'll show you."

"Show me what?"

"Just the door, man. Just the door."

She took him to a French restaurant. Cardenas had never been to a French restaurant in his life. Spanglish was near enough to French to enable him to read half the menu, and Hypatia translated the other half. Ten minutes later, he gazed helplessly across the table.

"Isn't there *anything* in this place that doesn't have some kind of sauce on it?"

"I'll take care of it." She ordered for both of them. The place was fancy enough to afford live waiters. Cardenas waited until the man left.

"What am I getting?"

"Poulet. Pollo. Plain. Don't worry, I wouldn't poison you with Bernaise or worse."

He pushed the menu aside. "The only thing I'm worried about is the bill."

"Don't. This was my invite, so I'm paying." He went through the motions of protesting. "Look, my salary's five times yours. Don't go ancien-macho on me."

"Not a chance. Why the largess?"

"Suspicious little northie, aren't you?"

"Consider my profession."

"I'm doing it because you didn't ask me. Because even though you didn't want me around back in Crescent's office, you still talked to me. Civil. Because you didn't make a pass at me. Because I like your dog. Enough reasons?"

"I'm too old to make passes at girls."

"That may be, but then I'm no girl. I haven't been a girl for a long time. Also, you spoke to my face instead of my chest."

"I wanted answers from you."

She giggled. It was an extraordinary and utterly unexpected sound, flitting up from the depths of that mature shape, as though for a few seconds it was suddenly home to a wandering seventeen-year-old.

"That's not what most men want."

Not knowing what to say next, he found himself looking toward the entrance. The curving plastic tunnel led up and out to the street above. They were down in fancy undersand, where corporate execs came to do business, where the flashmen sat, selling and stealing, and sylphs sold themselves to worms from Asia and Europa. Occasionally, the patrons ate.

"Worried about your dog?"

He looked back to her. "I could have brought him in with us. Claimed impaired vision. That's what Charliebo's trained for. Sometimes I do it."

"Unnecessary. He's fine in the checkroom. I told the girl there to filch

him some kitchen scraps. She said she'd be glad to. Charliebo's a lover. He'll probably enjoy this dinner more than you will."

His eyebrows rose. "I didn't hear you say anything about scraps. Thanks."

Her eyes dropped. Beneath her forearms the thermosensitive lexan tabletop changed color as the plastic responded to the subtle shifts in her body temperature.

"I like Charliebo. I've always preferred animals to people. Maybe because I haven't had much luck in my relationships with people." She looked back up at him. "Aren't you going to ask me about my wonderful marriages?"

"Hadn't planned on it."

"For a man, you're pretty understanding. Maybe I should've kept away from the pretty boys. The first one was a designer. Good, though not as good as me, not anywhere near Crescent's class. But he was slick. Did furniture. Did me, too. Designed me right out of his life. The second one lasted four years. I guess I went to the other extreme. Max had a body like a truck and a brain to match. After a while that got old. It was my turn to move on." She palmed a handful of shrimp crackers from a bowl. "That was ten years ago."

"Maybe you should have stuck with it awhile longer."

"You're one to talk." She looked around wildly. "God, I wish I had a cigarette."

"I saw a den up the block as we were coming down here." He did not offer the expected criticism.

"Can't anyway. Company doctors tell me I've got 'thin lungs,' whatever the hell those are."

"Sorry. You get anything from what we saw and heard today?"

She shook her head sadly. "Typical cop. Can't you leave business outside for a while?"

"I've done pretty good so far."

"I didn't sponge a thing. Nothing in Mermaid lively enough to prick a neuron. Oh, lots of fascinating design work, enough to awe just about anybody except Wally himself, but nothing worth killing for."

He found himself nodding agreement. "That's what I thought. I spent most of my time looking for what wasn't there. Blocks, wells, verbal codes, Janus gates. Didn't find any, though."

"I warned you. How can you sponge a code? Don't they sound the same as everything else?"

"To most people."

"What do you mean, 'to most people'?"

He met her eyes once more. "Hypatia, why do you think they put me on this case? Why do you think Agua Prieta had to bring somebody all the way over from Nogales?"

"Because you're good?"

"I'm more than that. Hypatia, I'm an intuit."

"Oh. Well."

Her expression stayed carefully neutral. She didn't look at him like he was some kind of freak. Which, of course, he wasn't. He was just infinitely more sensitive to sounds and verbal programming than practically everyone else. But the sensationalist media delighted in putting their spotlights on anything that hinted of the abnormal. Intuits were a favorite subject.

Cardenas could hear things in speech nobody except another intuit would notice. Previously that was something useful only to actors, lawyers, and judges. With the advent of verbal programming, it was recognized as more than a talent. It became a science.

In the late twentieth century, primitive machines had been devised which were crude mimics of natural intuits. When the majority of information programming and storage switched from physical to verbal input, the special abilities of those people identified as intuits were suddenly much in demand, since people could hide information with delicate phraseology and enunciation. They could also steal. The impetus came from the Japanese, who, after decades of trying to solve the difficulty of how to program in characters, leapfrogged the entire problem by helping to develop verbal programming.

Not all intuits went into police work. Cardenas knew of one who did nothing but interview for major corporations, checking on potential employees. As living lie detectors, their findings were not admissible in court, but that didn't prevent others from making use of their talents.

Six years of blindness had only sharpened Cardenas's talents.

He'd attended a few intuit conferences, where the talk was all about new vorec circuits and semantics. Little was said. Little had to be, since there were no misunderstandings between speakers. Among the attendees had been other cops, translators for multinats and governments, and entertainers. He remembered with special pleasure his conversation with the famous Eskimo Billy Oomigmak, a lieutenant with the Northwest Territories Federales. An Innuit intuit would be an obvious candidate for celebrity status and Billy Oo had taken full advantage of it. Cardenas had no desire to trade places with him.

"Can you read my thoughts?"

"No, no. That's a common misconception. All I can do is sense the real meaning of a statement, detect if what's being said is what's being meant. If somebody utilizes phraseology to conceal something either in person or through an artvoc, I can often spot it. That's why there are so many intuit judges. Why do you think. . . ?"

He stopped. Hypatia had a hand over her mouth, stifling a laugh. Obviously, she knew intuits weren't mind readers. She'd been teasing him. He pouted without realizing how silly it made him look.

"Why'd you take me out, anyway? Charliebo aside."



Her hand dropped. She wasn't smiling now, he saw. "Because it's been a long time since I was out with a real grown-up, Angel. I like children, but not as dates."

He eyed her sharply. "Is that what this is? A date?"

"Fooled you, didn't I? All this time you thought it was a continuation of business. Tell me: how'd they let somebody as small as you on the force?"

He almost snapped at her, until he realized she was still teasing him. Well, he could tease, too. But all he could think of to say was "Because there's nobody better at breaking into a Box."

"Is that so? You haven't proven that to my satisfaction. Listening and probing at triple verbal's impressive, but you still didn't find anything."

"We don't know yet that there's anything to find."

"If there isn't?"

He shrugged. "I go back to Nogales where I can't hear GenDyne scream."

"Dinner," she said as their main course arrived. Cardenas's chicken was simply and elegantly presented. He hadn't realized how hungry he was. Eight hours of sponging had left him drained. He hardly heard her as he reached for his silverware.

"Maybe later we'll see how efficient a prober you really are."

He intuited that easily, but didn't let on that he had. Steam hissed from the chicken as he sliced into it.

Each day he went into the GenDyne Box, and each evening he left the corporate offices, feeling more baffled and disturbed than when he'd gone in. Not that Mermaid wasn't full of accessible, fascinating information: it was. It was just that none of it was of the slightest use.

Hypatia was of inestimable help, explaining where he didn't understand, patiently elaborating on concepts he thought he understood but actually did not. GenDyne assigned her to him for the duration of his investigation. It pleased him. He thought it might have pleased her. After a week, even she couldn't keep his spirits up. He could be patient, he was methodical, but he was used to progressing, even at a creep. They weren't learning anything. It was worse than going nowhere; he felt as if they were going backward. Nor could he escape the feeling that somebody somewhere was laughing at him. He didn't like it. Cardenas had a wry, subtle sense of humor, but not where his work was concerned.

Anything that smelled of potential he recorded for playback at half-speed, then quarter-speed. His senses were taut as the high string on a viola. He listened for the slightest off-pronunciation, the one quirky vowel that might suggest an amorphous anomaly in the data. He found nothing. Mermaid was clean, neat, tidy, and innocuous as baby powder.

On the eighth day he gave up. The solution to Crescent's murder wasn't going to be found in his files.

It was time to look for parallels. He'd spent too much time at GenDyne,

but he was used to finding hints, clues, leads wherever he searched, and this utter failure rankled. Perhaps the Parabas Box would be more revealing. It was time to access Noschek's work.

Half on a whim, he requested Hypatia's assistance. It was a measure of the importance GenDyne attached to his work that they agreed immediately. As for Spango, she was delighted, though she concealed her pleasure from the dour company official who pulled her off her current project to give her the news. It was like a paid vacation from designing.

When the people at Parabas were told, they went spatial. They'd sooner shut down than let a GenDyne designer into their Box. Important people in LaLa talked reassuringly to their counterparts in São Paulo. It was agreed that finding out what had happened to the two designers was paramount. There were certain safeguards that could be instituted to ensure that Parabas's visitor saw only the contents of Noschek's files. Parabas consented. Agua Pri was overruled. Hypatia would be allowed in. But nobody smiled when Cardenas and his GenDyne "spy" were admitted to the dead designer's office.

It was larger than Crescent's, and emptier. No charming domestic scenes floating above this desk. No expensive colorcrawl on the walls. Noschek had been a bachelor. Barely out of design school, top of his class, brilliant in ways his employers hadn't figured out how to exploit before his death, he'd been the object of serious executive headhunting by at least two European and one Soviet multinat in the three years he'd been at Parabas.

Hypatia'd read his history, too. As she looked around the spartan office, her voice was muted. "Nobody becomes a senior designer before thirty. Let alone twenty-five."

Cardenas called up the pictures they'd been shown of the vacuumed designer. Noschek was tall and slim, still looked like a teenager, a beautiful Slav with delicate features and the soulful dark eyes of some Kafkaesque antihero. Something in all the holos struck Cardenas the instant he saw them, but he couldn't stick a label on it.

The Parabas Box was approximately the same size as GenDyne's. Noschek's key was Delphi Alexander Philip. The voice of the wallscreen was deep and resonant, instantly responsive to his sponging, as he scanned the meteoric career of the young designer. Parabas's security team had been at work 'round the clock. Some of the information would reveal itself only when Hypatia was out of the room. The South Americans might be cooperative, but they weren't stupid.

Each time Hypatia left, she took Charliebo with her for company. She liked playing with the dog, and the hair she scratched out of him gave Parabas's cleanteam fits. Each day brought them closer together. Her and Charliebo, that is. Cardenas still wasn't sure about her and himself.

It didn't matter whether she was present or not. Three days of hard sponging saw him no nearer any answers than when he'd stepped off the

induction shuttle from Nogales.

On the fourth day the screen went hostile and nearly took him with it.

He was sponging off a hard-to-penetrate corner of Philip, down in the lower right corner of the Box. Hypatia had gone outside with Charliebo. Biocircuits spawned the same steady, sonorous flow of information he'd been listening to for hours, revealing themselves via concomitant word streams and images on the wallscreen. If he'd been watching intently, he might have had time to see a flicker before it declared itself, but as usual, he was most attuned to aural playout. Maybe that saved him. He never knew.

Wind erupted into the office, blasting his thinning hair back across his head. On the screen the visual had gone berserk, running at ten speed through emptiness, reason gone, bereft of logic and organization. A dull roaring pounded in his ears. Dimly, he thought he could hear Charliebo frantically howling outside the door. There was a hammering, though whether outside the screen-secured door or inside his brain he couldn't tell. He pressed his palms over his ears, letting the vorec spill to the floor.

Something was coming out of the wall.

A full-sense holo, a monstrous alien shape thick with slime and smelling of ancient foulness, an oozing shifting mass of raw biocircuitry-generated false collagen that pulsed slowly and massively, boooming with each heave. Reflective pustules lining its epidermis bristled with raw neural connectors that reached for him. The hammering on the door was relentless now, and he thought he could hear people shouting. They'd have to be shouting very loudly indeed to make their presence known through the sound-dampened barrier.

He tried to block out sight and sound of the ballooning apparition. The door was security-sealed to prevent unauthorized access. Where was the override? It was manual, he remembered. He fought the sensorial assault, tears streaming from his eyes, as he struggled to locate the switch.

Bits and pieces of the false collagen were sloughing away from the nightmare's flanks as it drifted toward him. The amount of crunch required to construct a projection of such complexity and reality had to be astronomical, Cardenas knew. He wondered how much of Parabas's considerable power had suddenly gone dead as it was funneled into this single gate.

As it drew near, it became mostly mouth, a dark, bottomless psychic pit that extended back into the wall, lined with teeth that were twitching, mindless biogrowths.

He stumbled backward, keeping the desk between the projection and himself. Near the center of the desk a line of contact strips was glowing brightly as a child's toy. The expanding mouth was ready to swallow him, the steady roar from its nonexistent throat like the approach of a train inside a tunnel.

Hit the release. The voice that screamed at him was a tiny, fading squeak. His own. *The yellow strip.* He extended a shaky hand. He thought he touched the right strip. Or maybe he fell on it.

* * *

When he regained consciousness, he was lying on the floor, staring at the ceiling of Vladimir Noschek's office. Someone said two words he would never forget.

"He's alive."

Then hands, lifting him. The view changing as he was raised. He broke free, staggering away from his saviors, and they waited silently while he heaved into a wastebasket. When someone pressed a mild sting against his right arm, he looked around sharply.

There must have been something in his expression that made the man retreat. His expression, however, was reassuring. "No combinants. Just a pick-me-up. To kill the nausea and dizziness."

He managed to nod. The Brazilian turned to whisper to his companion. Like images drawn on transparent gels, Cardenas saw collagen teeth bursting before his retinas as the afterimage of the monster continued to fade from his memory.

"You scared the shit out of us." Hypatia was watching him carefully. She looked worried.

Something heavy and warm pressed against his legs. He glanced down, automatically stroked Charliebo's spine. The shepherd whined and tried to press closer.

"What happened?" one of the medicos asked as he closed his service case.

Somehow Cardenas managed to keep down the anger that was building inside him. "It was a psychomorph. Full visual, audio, collagenic presence. The works. Sensorium max. *Why the hell didn't somebody tell me this was a tactile screen?*"

"Tac. . . ?" Both medicos turned dumbfounded stares on the east wall. It was Hypatia who finally spoke.

"Can't be, Angel. Designers aren't given access to tactile. Nobody is. Uses too much crunch. Besides, that's strictly military stuff. Even somebody as valued as Noscheck wouldn't be allowed near it."

The chief medico looked back at him. "No tactiles in Parabas S.A. I'd know, my staff would know. You sure it was a psychomorph?" Cardenas just stared at him until the man nodded. "Okay, so it was a psychomorph. I don't know how, but I'm not in a position to argue with you. I wasn't here."

"That's right, compadre," Cardenas told him softly. "You weren't here."

"You gonna be all right?" The same stare. The medico shrugged, spoke to his assistant. "So okay. So we'll sort it out later. Come on." They left, though not without a last disbelieving glance in the direction of the now-silent wallscreen.

As soon as the door shut behind them and sealed, Hypatia turned on him. "What's going on here? That couldn't have been a psychomorph that hit you. There isn't enough crunch in the whole Parabas Box to structure one!"

"That's exactly what I've been thinking," he told her quietly. "But it was

a psychomorph. The most detailed one I've ever seen. I do not want to see it again. It was a trap, a guard, something to wipe out the nosy. It almost wiped me."

She was watching him closely. "If it was as bad as you claim, how come you're standing there talking to me instead of lying on the floor babbling like a spastic infant?"

"I — felt it coming. Intuition. Just in time to start closing down my perception. I can do that, some. When you're blind for six years, you get practice in all sorts of arcane exercises. I sidestepped it right before it could get a psychic fix on me, and managed to cue the door. It must have cycled when you all came in. They can't fix on more than one person at a time. Takes too much crunch."

"I thought that kind of advanced tech was beyond you."

He met her gaze. "Did I ever say that?"

"No. No, you didn't. I just assumed, you being a duty cop and all — people do a lot of assuming about you, don't they?"

He nodded tersely. "It helps. People like to think of cops as dumber than they are. Some of us are. Some of us aren't. I don't discourage it."

"How old are you, anyway?"

"Fifty-three in two months."

"Shit. I thought you were my age. I'm forty-one."

"Part of it's being small. You always look younger."

"What kind of cop are you, anyway, Cardenas?"

He was searching beneath the desk, straightened when he found the vorec mike. "A good one."

You just didn't brew a full-scale sensorium-max hostile psychomorph out of a standard industrial Box, no matter how big the company. Hypatia knew that. Not unless Parabas was into illegal military design, and under questioning the company reps did all but cut their wrists to prove their innocence. Cardenas believed them. They had more to lose by lying than by telling the truth.

He was beginning to think brilliant was too feeble a word to use to describe the talents of the late Vladimir Noscheck.

But Noscheck had made a mistake. By slipping something as powerful as the psychomorph into Philip storage, he'd as much as confessed to having something to hide, something to protect. Ordinarily, that wouldn't have mattered because the sponger discovering it would have been turned to mental jelly. Only Cardenas's training and experience had saved him. With Hypatia at his side he continued to probe.

They solved the secret of the commercial wallscreen quickly enough. It was numb as a sheet of plywood — until you went someplace you weren't wanted. Then you tripped the alert and the screen went tactile. It was one hell of a modification, worth plenty. Cardenas could have cared less. He wasn't interested in how it was done as much as he was *why*. The camou-

flage was perfect.

A tactile screen could spit back at you. One that looked normal and then suddenly became tactile was unheard of. The Parabas executives went silly when the medicos made their report. They wanted to take the screen apart immediately, resorting to furious threats when Cardenas refused. Gradually, they gave up and left him alone again. They'd get their hands on Noschek's last innovation soon enough.

If it was Vladimir Noschek's last innovation, Cardenas thought.

There was also the possibility that the dual tactile-numb screen wasn't the work of Noschek at all, that it had been set up by whoever had vacuumed him. The psychomorph could have been inserted specifically to deal with trackers like Angel Cardenas. Or it could be a false lead, spectacular enough to divert any probers from the real answers.

Answers hell. He wasn't sure he knew the right questions yet.

They'd find them.

First, he needed to know how a max psychomorph had been inserted into a conventional industrial Box. Hypatia confirmed his suspicions about the requisite parameters.

"If you saw what you say you saw, then Noschek or whoever built the insert needed a lot more crunch than Parabas employs here in Agua Pri."

"How do you know how much crunch Parabas has here?"

"It gets around. No reason to keep it a deep dark secret."

"Assuming for the sake of discussion that it's Noschek's toy we're dealing with, could he have drawn on crunch from the home office?"

"Possible, but considering the distance, it would've been mighty risky. Would make more sense to steal locally."

"How much would he have had to steal?"

"Based on what you describe, I'd say he would've needed access to at least one Cray-IBM."

"GenDyne?"

She laughed. "That's more crunch than our whole installation would use in a year. No way. Though I'd love to have the chance to play with one."

"So who on the Strip uses a Cribm?"

"Beats the hell out of me, Angel. You're the cop. You find out."

He did. Fast, using Parabas's circuits to access the major utility files for the whole Southwest Region in El Paso Juarez. His opto police security clearance let him cut through normal layers of bureaucratic infrastructure like a scalpel through collagen.

"Sony-Digital," he finally told her as the records flashed on screen. The wall's audio checked his pronunciation. "Telefunken. Fordmatsu. That's everybody."

She stared at the holoed info. "What now?"

"We find out who's been losing crunch — if we can."

They could. Word of what had happened at GenDyne and Parabas had

made the corporate rounds. As soon as Cardenas identified himself and the case he was working on, they had plenty of cooperation.

It was Fordmatsu. Their own security was unaware of the theft, much less its extent, so cleverly had it been carried out. Cardenas sourced it, though. He didn't bother to inform them. He was no accountant, and he didn't want anybody sponging around until he'd finished what he'd come to Agua Pri for. Though no expert, he knew enough to admire the skill that had been at work in Fordmatsu's Box. Everything had been done during off-hours and painstakingly compensated for throughout the crunchlines. Neat.

"How much?" Hypatia asked him.

"Can't tell for sure. Hard to total, the way its tucked in here and there. Weeks' worth. Maybe months?"

She stared at him. "A Cribm can crunch trillions of bytes a second. I can't think of a problem it couldn't solve inside an hour. There isn't anything that needs days of that kind of crunch, let alone months."

"Somebody needed it." He rose from behind the desk. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Back to GenDyne. There are some sequences I ran here I want to rerun on Crescent's wall."

"What about the psychomorph?"

He put an arm around her shoulders. She didn't shrug it off. "I'm going to endrun that sucker so slick it won't have time to squeal."

It was all there in Crescent's Mermaid. If he hadn't tripped the psychomorph in Noschek's storage, they never would have found it. He leaned back in the dead man's chair and rubbed his eyes.

"Fordmatsu is out millions, and they don't even know it. Somebody was running one gigabox of a sequence."

"Noschek?"

"Not just Noschek. Maybe he designed the sponge schematic, but they were both into it."

"Damn," she muttered. "What for?"

"Aye, there's the rub. That we don't know yet."

"But it doesn't make any sense. Why would a GenDyne designer co-opt with somebody out of Parabas? You think maybe they were going to fracture and set up their own firm?"

"I don't think so. If that was their intent, they could have done it by intrapreneuring. Easier and cheaper." He leaned back in the chair and ran a hand down Charliebo's neck. "Besides, it doesn't fit their profiles. Crescent was pure company man, GenDyne do or die. Noschek was too unstable to survive outside the corporate womb."

"Then why?"

"I thought they might've been doing some work for somebody else, but there's no indication of that anywhere. They did a hell of a job of hiding what they were up to, but no way could they hide all that crunch. You know

what I think?" He gave Charliebo a pat and swiveled around to face her. "I think there's a Box in here that doesn't belong to GenDyne."

"And Noschek?"

"Maybe there's one in Parabas, too. Or maybe the same Box floating between both locations. With that much crunch you could do just about anything. Quién sabe what they were in to?"

"So you're thinking maybe whoever they were working for vacuumed them for the crunch?"

"Not the crunch, no. Whatever our boys were using it for. Haven't got a clue to that yet." He found himself rubbing his eyes again.

She rose and walked over to stand behind his chair. Her hands dug into his shoulders, kneading, releasing the accumulated tension. "Let's get out of here for a while. You're spending too much time sponging. You try doing that and playing the analytical cop simultaneously, you're going to turn your brain to mush."

He hardly heard her. "I've got to figure the why before we can figure the how."

"Later. No more figuring for today." She leaned forward. He was enveloped by the folds of her jumpsuit and the heavy, warm curves it enclosed. "Even a sponge needs to rest."

It came to him when he wasn't thinking about it, which is often the path taken by revelation. He was lying prone on the oversized hybred, feeling the preprogrammed wave motion stroking his back like extruded lanolin. Hypatia lay nearby, her body pale arcs and valleys like sand dunes lit by moonlight. The ceaseless murmur of the Strip seeped through the down-polarized windows, a susurration speaking of people and electronics, industry and brief flaring sparks of pleasure.

He ran a hand along her side, starting at her shoulder and accelerating down her ribs, slowing as it ascended the curve of her hip. Her skin was cool, unwrinkled. Her mind wasn't the only thing that had been well taken care of. She rolled over to face him. Next to the bed Charliebo stirred in his sleep, chasing ghost rabbits which stayed always just ahead of his teeth.

"What is it?" She blinked sleepily at him, then made a face. "God, don't you ever sleep? I thought I wore you out enough for that, anyway."

He smiled absently. "You did. I just woke up. Funny. You spend all your waking hours working a problem, and all you get for your efforts is garbage. Then when you're not concentrating on it — there it is. Set out like cake at a wedding. I just sorted it out."

She sat up on the hybred. Not all the lingering motion was in the mattress. He luxuriated in the sight of her.

"Sorted what out?"

"What Crescent and Noschek were doing together. It wasn't in the Boxes, and it wasn't in their files. No wonder corporate security couldn't find any-

thing. They never would have. The answer wasn't in their work. It was in them. In their voices, their attitudes, what they had in common and what they didn't. In what they didn't commit to storage. They shared their work, but they kept themselves to themselves."

"A cop shouldn't be full of riddles."

"Have you got a terminal here?"

"Does a cow have udders?" She slid off the bed, jounced across the room, and touched a switch. A portion of the wall slid upward to reveal a small screen, while the vorec popped out of a slot nearby, an obedient metal eel. He walked over and plucked it from its holder, studied the screen. They were both naked, both comfortable with it and each other.

"Pretty fancy setup for a household."

"Think. I have to work at home sometimes. I need more than a toy." She leaned against him.

"Look, let me concentrate for a minute, will you?"

She straightened. He saw her teeth flash in the dim light. "Okay. But only for a minute."

He activated the screen, filled the vorec with a steady stream of instructions. It was slower than the designer units he'd sponged at Parabas and GenDyne but far faster than any normal home unit. Soon he was running the files he needed from both companies. Then he surprised Hypatia by accessing Nogales. The problem he set up was for the Sociopsycultural Department at the U of A. It didn't take the university Box long to render its determination.

"There it is."

She stared at the screen, then back at him. "There *what* is?"

"Answers, maybe." He slipped the vorec back into its slot. The screen went dark. "Let's ambulate."

"What, now?" She ran fingers through her unkempt hair. "Don't you ever give a lady a chance to catch up?"

"You can catch up next week, next month." He found his pants and was stepping into them. "I think I know what happened. Most of it, anyway. The data make sense. It's what our two boys did that doesn't make sense, but I think they went and did it, anyway."

She thumbed a closet open and began rummaging through her clothes. "You mean you know who vacuumed them?"

He fastened the velcrite of his waistband. The blue Federale bracelet bounced on his wrist. "Nobody vacuumed them. They vacuumed themselves."

She paused with the velcrite catch of her bra. "Another riddle? I'm getting tired of your riddles, Angel."

"No riddle. They vacuumed themselves. Simultaneously, via program. I think it was a double suicide. And by the way, I'm no Angel. It's 'Ahn-hell,' for crissakes."

"That's Tex-Mex. I only speak Anglo."

"Screw you."

She struck a pose. "I thought you were in a hurry to leave?"

Security let them back into GenDyne, but they weren't happy about it. There was something wrong about cops going to work at three A.M. The guard in the hall took his time. His helmet flared as the scanner roved over both nocturnal visitors. Just doing his job. Eventually, he signed them through.

They went straight to Crescent's office. It was the same as they'd left it, nothing moved, unexpectedly sterile-looking under the concealed incandescents. Cardenas found his gaze returning unwillingly to the bright family portraits that hovered above the desk.

He flicked the vorec and brought the wallscreen online. He warmed up with some simple mnemonics before getting serious with the tactical verbals he'd decided to use. Hypatia caught her breath as the wall flared, but no psychomorph coalesced to threaten them. Cardenas was being careful, additionally so with Hypatia in the room. Charliebo cocked his head sideways as he stared at the screen.

Five minutes later Cardenas had the answer to the first of his questions.

"It's tactile. Same kind of concealed setup Noschek had in his place."

"Jesus! You could warn a body."

"There's no danger. I'm not sponging deep yet. All surface. There are ways. I was pretty sure I wasn't going to trigger anything."

"Thanks," she said dryly.

He dove in, the words flowing in a steady stream into the vorec as he keyed different levels within the main GenDyne Box. This time he went in fast and easy. He went wherever he wanted to without any problem — and that was the problem. After what seemed like fifteen minutes, he paused to check his bracelet. Two hours gone. Soon it would be light outside.

Hypatia had settled herself on the edge of the desk. She was watching him intently. "Anything?"

"Not what I came for. Plenty Parabas would pay to get their hands on. I'm sure the reverse would be true if I was sponging their Box like this." He shook his head as he regarded the screen. "There's got to be another Box in there, somewhere. Or a section that's reading out dead."

"Impossible. You need full cryo to keep the Box wet and accessible. You can't just set something like that up in the middle of an outfit like GenDyne without tripping half a dozen alarms."

"Alarms are usually set to warn of withdrawal, not entry."

"Any kind of solid insertion like that would have people asking questions."

"You can avoid questions if you can avoid notice. These guys were wizards at avoiding notice."

She crossed her arms. "I still say its impossible."

He turned back to the wall. "We'll see."

He found it only because he had some idea what he was looking for. No one else would have glanced at it. There was no separate Box. Hypatia was right about that. Instead, it was buried deep within the basic GenDyne Box itself, disguised as a dormant file for a biolight conveyor. When he sponged it, Hypatia caught her breath.

"My God. A subox tunnel."

"I've heard about them," Cardenas murmured tightly, "but I've never actually seen one before."

"That's as close to being invisible as you can get and still be inside a Box." She was standing close to the wall now, examining the holo intensely. "Whoever made this was half-designer and half-magician."

Cardenas found himself nodding. "That's our boys." He studied the slowly rotating cylindrical schematic. "The key question is, where does it go?" He was set to start in when Hypatia stopped him, walking over to put a hand on his arm and block his view of the screen.

"Maybe we better get some help. This is way over my head."

"And therefore mine, too?" He smiled. "You don't have to know how to build a plane to know how to fly one. I can handle it."

"More psychomorphs? And who knows what else?"

"I'm ready for it this time. Hypatia, I can intuit *fast*. Anything starts coming out of that tube, I'll just dry out."

"Man, I hope you know what you're doing." She stepped aside. Together they stared as he spoke into the vorec and started down the tube.

They encountered no traps, no guards. Smart. Oh so smart, he thought to himself. Make it look like an ordinary part of the Box. Make it look like it belongs. Normalcy was the best disguise.

They wouldn't put him off the track with that. Because even though he didn't understand the how yet, he knew the why.

Hypatia asked him about it again. "I still don't get this double-suicide business."

"It's what they were." He spoke between commands to the vorec, waiting while the wall complied with each sequence of instructions. He was tense but in control. It was one lon-n-n-*ng* tube.

"Noschek particularly. He was the key. You see, part of the tragedy was that they could never meet in person. Security would have found out right away, and that would have finished both of them. It meant they could only communicate through the joint Fordmatsu link they established. Like in the old times when people sent information by personal messenger. It was too complex, too involved, too *intense* for it to just be business. There had to be more to it than that. And then when I couldn't find any business at all, that clinched it."

"Clinched what?"

"The fact that they had to be lovers. Via the Fordmatsu link. Crescent and Noschek were homosexual, Hypatia."

She went dead quiet for several minutes before replying. "Oh come on, Angel! Crescent had a family. Two kids."

"He was latent. Probably all his life. That's why I had to run double profiles together with what I suspected through the Sociopsycultural Box up at U of A. It confirmed. I'm sure if we had time to go over their lives in more detail, we'd find plenty of other clues.

"You told me Crescent was a trueglue GenDyne man. I'm sure he was. GenDyne's about as liberal as its multinat counterparts. Which is to say, not at all. Two Fundamentalists on its Board. Crescent knew if he strayed once, it would put an end to his career. So he stayed in the closet. Covered himself thoroughly for the sake of his future. I've no doubt he loved his wife. Meanwhile, everything proceeded the way he'd probably dreamed it might. Gradually, his tendencies faded as he buried himself in his family and work.

"Then Noschek came along, probably through a casual social hookup. A brilliant, wild young talent. Pretty to boot. And they got to know each other. Most relationships develop. This one exploded."

"So they 'related' through Box links?"

He nodded. "Try to imagine what they must have gone through. It's all there in their voices, in the stuff I was able to sponge from the months before they vacuumed. They knew they couldn't meet. Crescent knew it would ruin him. I don't know if that bothered Noschek — he didn't seem to give a damn for social conventions. But he cared about Crescent. So they built this Fordmatsu link out of stolen crunch."

"They wouldn't need all that crunch just to maintain a private communication."

"Exactly. So they started discussing their problem, fooling around with all that excess crunch they had access to. Meanwhile, their relationship just kept getting tighter and tighter at the same time as they were becoming increasingly frustrated with their situation.

"Eventually, they found something. Noschek was the innovator, Crescent the experienced constructor. They discovered a way to be together. Always."

"Through mutual suicide?" She shook her head. "That doesn't bring people together. It doesn't profile either. Noschek sure, but Crescent was too stable to go for that."

"How stable do you think he would have been if his wife had ever found out? Or his kids? The only way to spare them the disgrace was to make it look like a murder. That way our boys would be able to slip away untarnished and untroubled."

"So they figured out a way to vacuum themselves? Papier-mâché wings and brass harps and the whole metaphysical ensemble?"

"No. They're vacuumed all right, but they're not gone. They're together,

like they wanted to be. Together in a sense no one else can understand. I wonder if they fully understood it themselves. But they were willing to take the risk."

"That doesn't make any sense."

He took a deep breath. "Consider all the crunch they'd been siphoning from Fordmatsu. Then consider Noschek's hobbies. One of them is real interesting. You ever hear of MR?"

"Like in 'mister'?"

"No. Like in morphological resonance."

She made another face. "Gimme a break, Angel. I'm just a lousy designer. What the hell is morphological resonance?"

"The concept's been around for decades. Not many people take it seriously. The scientific establishment has too much invested in existing theories. That doesn't put off those folks who are more interested in the truth than intellectual comfort. People like Noschek. When I found out he was into it, I did some reading.

"A long time ago somebody ran a bunch of rats through a series of mazes in Scotland. The same mazes, over and over, for much longer than anyone would think necessary to prove a point. Each time the rats ran a maze, they managed it a little faster."

"That's a revelation?"

"Consider this, then." He leaned forward. "Some folks in Australia decided to run the same maze. Identical as to size, distance, configuration, reward at the end, everything. The first time they tried it, the rats ran the distance just a hair faster than the first time their Scottish cousins ran it. Then they repeated the experiment in India. Same thing. The Indian rats got off to a quicker start than did the Australians. What do you get from that?"

She looked bemused. "That Indian rats are smarter than Scottish or Australian rats?"

He shook his head impatiently. "It wasn't just done with rats and mazes. Other similar experiments were run, with identical results. For the scientific establishment, that hasn't been conclusive enough. But it hasn't stopped theorists from making proposals."

"It never does."

"It was suggested that each time an intelligent creature repeats something exactly as previously done, it sets up a resonance. Not in the air. In — space-time, the ether, I don't know. But it's there, and the more it's repeated, the stronger and more permanent the resonance becomes, until it spreads far enough to affect the identical pattern no matter where it's repeated. That's where the rats come in. The theory holds that the rats in Australia were picking up on the resonance set up by the maze runners in Scotland. Then again in India. Which is why they ran the maze slightly faster at the start and progressively thereafter for the duration of the experiment. The resonance gave them a head start."

"MR's been used to explain a lot of things since it was first formulated, up to and including mankind's exponential progress in science and technology. According to the theory, we're working on one hell of an expanding resonance. Each time we come up with something new, it's because we're building on thought patterns or experimental methodologies that've been repeated in the past."

"What's all this got to do with our departed designers?"

"You told me what a supercooled Cribm can do. Trillions of crunch a second. Unthinkable quantity in an hour. Incalculable content in a day. Cribms are used to crunch whole bushels of problems. Suppose you set it to process just one problem, instead of hundreds. Set it to run the sequence over and over, trillions upon trillions of times. Think of the resonance you could set up. Enough to last a long time without fading. Maybe even enough to become permanent." He nodded toward the flickering, flaring wallscreen.

"You could set it up in there."

She followed his gaze, found herself whispering. "Crescent and Noschek?"

"Safe, together. As a dual resonance. Patterns of memory, electrical impulses: what we call memory. Reduced to streams of electrons and run over and over and over until brought separately into being as a floating resonance inside a Box. Not in formal storage, exactly. Different. Independent of the Box systems and yet localized by them. So they'd hang together even better. They reduced themselves to a program the Cribm could process and set it to repeating the designated patterns, using all that stolen crunch. They're in there, Hypatia. In a Box built for two."

"That's crazy." Her mouth was suddenly dry. For the first time she felt uncomfortable in the cool office. The door, the unbreakable window was keeping them in instead of others out. "You can't *Box* a person."

"Resonance, Hypatia. Not a program as we conceive of one. Repetition creates the pattern, brings it into existence. You vacuum yourself into the Cribm, and it repeats you back into existence. As to whether that includes anything we'd recognize as consciousness, I don't know."

"If it's a pattern the Cribm can repeat, maybe it could be — accessed?"

His expression was somber. "I don't know. I don't know how they're in there, if they're just frozen or if they have some flexibility. If they're anything more than just a twitch in space-time, Hypatia, they've found immortality. Even if the power to the Box fails, the resonance should remain. It may be restricted in range, but it's independent of outside energy. The resonance maintains itself. Don't get me started on thermodynamics. The whole thing's cockeyed. But it's not new. People have been discussing it for decades."

"Easier when they're talking about rats," she murmured. "You say they're restricted by the confines of the Box. Can they move around inside it?"

"You've got the questions, I haven't got the answers. We're dealing with something halfway between physics and metaphysics. I don't know if I should consult a cyberneticist or a medium." He indicated the tunnel on the screen. "Maybe when we get to the end of that, we'll find something besides a dead end."

She joined him in monitoring their progress. The tunnel seemed endless. By now it should have pushed beyond the confines of the GenDyne Box, yet it showed no signs of weakening.

"They took a terrible chance. They worked awfully hard to hide themselves."

Cardenas stroked Charliebo. "Maybe all to no end. The theories I've enumerated might be just that. It's more than likely they're as dead as their physical selves."

"Yeah. But if there's anything to it — if there's anything *in there* — they might not like being disturbed. Remember the psychomorph."

"I'm pretty sure I can handle the screen if it goes tactile again, now that I've got an idea what to expect. I can always cut the power."

"Can you? You said this resonance, if it exists, would remain whether the power was on or not."

"Their resonance, yes, but cutting the power would deprive them of access to the system — assuming they're able to interface with it at all. They could have inserted traps like the psychomorph before they vacuumed themselves."

"And you think you can access this resonance?"

"If it exists, and only if it's somehow interfaced with the GenDyne Box."

Two hours later the rising sun found them no nearer the end of the tunnel than when they'd begun. Thirty years earlier Cardenas could have hung on throughout the day. Not anymore. There were times when mandatory retirement no longer seemed a destination to be avoided. This was one of them.

He let Hypatia drive him back to her place and put him to bed. He fell asleep fast, but he didn't sleep well.

A psychomorph was chasing him: a gruesome, gory nightmare dredged up from the depths of someone else's disturbed subconscious. Frantically, he tried to find a kill strip to shut down the power, but someone had removed them all from the control panel in front of him. And there were screens all around him now, and on the ceiling, and beneath his feet, each one belching forth a new and more horrible monstrosity. He curled into a fetal ball, whimpering as they touched him with their filthy tendrils, hunting for his psychic core so they could enter and drive him insane. One used a keyword to open the top of his skull like a can opener.

He sat up in bed, sweating. Beneath his buttocks the sheet was soaked. A glance at the holo numerals that clung like red spiders to the wall behind the bed showed 0934. But it was still dark outside. Then he noticed the tiny P.M.

to the right of the last numeral. He'd slept the whole day. His mouth confirmed it, his tongue conveying the taste of old leather.

"Hypatia?" Naked, he slid slowly off the hybred and stumbled toward the bathroom, running both hands through his hair. Water on his face helped. More down his throat helped to jump-start the rest of his body. He used one of her lilac towels to dry himself, turned back to the bedroom.

"Hypatia? Charliebo?"

She wasn't in the kitchen, nor the greeting room. Neither was the shepherd. Both gone out. Maybe she'd taken him for a walk. Charliebo was well-trained, but his insides were no different from any other dog's. He'd go with her. Dog and designer had grown close to each other this past week.

He knew she was worried about him. While he would have preferred to have spared her the concern, he was pleased. Been a long time since anyone besides Charliebo had really cared about Angel Cardenas, and Hypatia had better legs than the shepherd. Sure, he was stressing himself, but he could take it. All part of the job. Experience compensated for the lack of youthful resilience. He could handle any traps Crescent and Noschek had left behind, even if she didn't think he could.

He stopped in the middle of the room. Concerned about him, yeah. About his ability to deal with another psychomorph or worse. Under those circumstances what would a caring, compassionate woman do? What could she do, to spare him another dangerous, possibly lethal confrontation? Couldn't an experienced, younger designer follow the path he'd already found and thus keep him from possible danger?

Shit.

He was wide awake now; alert, attuned, and worried. He didn't remember getting dressed, didn't recall the short elevator ride to the subterranean garage. Sure enough, her little three-wheeler was gone. She wasn't out for an evening stroll with Charliebo, then. His lungs heaved as he raced for the nearest induction station. It would be faster than trying to call for police backup.

Besides, he might be getting himself all upset over nothing. If he was wrong, he'd end up looking the prize fool. If he was right, well, Hypatia was highly competent. But he'd much rather play the fool.

The only thing that saved him was three decades on the force. Thirty years' experience means you don't go barging into a room. Thirty years' handling ninlocos and juice dealers and assorted flakes and whackos says you go in quietly. Go in fast and loud, and you might upset somebody, and he might react before you had time to size things up.

Thirty years' experience told him Hypatia would have security-sealed the door to the office. When he discovered it wasn't, he opened it as slowly as possible.

The lights were on low. The wallscreen was alive with flaring symbols

and muted verbal responses. In the center was the tunnel, twisting and glowing like an electrified python. He picked out the desk, the muted holo portraits of Wallace Crescent's abandoned, innocent family.

Hypatia was on the floor. There was enough light to illuminate the figure bent over her. Enough light to show the still, motionless lump of Charliebo lying not far away.

Quiet as he'd been, the figure still sensed his presence. It turned to face him. The blend suit melted into the background, but he recognized the triple lenses that formed a multicolored swath across the face instantly. All three primaries were down and functioning now.

Cardenas saw that Hypatia's jumpsuit was unzipped all the way down to her thighs. A handful of secrylic had been slapped across her mouth, muffling her as it hardened. More of the so-called police putty bound her ankles and wrists. She tried to roll toward him but found it hard to move because the figure had one knee resting on her hip.

His gaze flicked to Charliebo. The shepherd's chest was still, the eyes vacant. Cardenas's vision blurred slightly, and his teeth moved against each other.

"Don't," said the flashman. He didn't sound uncertain tonight. He glanced down at Hypatia, then smiled up at the Federale. "Worried about baby? No need to. Maybe. Come in, close the door behind you. If I'd sealed it, you would've gone for help. This way I only have to deal with you, right?" He leaned slightly to his left as if to see behind Cardenas.

"Right." Cardenas kept his hands in view, his movements slow and unambiguous. Hypatia stared at him imploringly. He saw that she'd been crying. Easy, he told himself. Keep it easy.

But it wasn't easy, it wasn't easy at all.

"You so much as twitch the wrong way, Federale, and she'll be sorry." The flashman was grinning at something only he found amusing. "You should've stayed in bed, man."

No hurry. No emergency. Not yet. He moved off to his right. "Why'd you have to kill my dog?"

He didn't get the response he expected. The flashman let out a short, sharp laugh. "Hey, that's funny! You don't know why it's funny, do you? I'll tell you later, after I'm through here. Or maybe I'll let her tell you." He glanced quickly at the screen, not giving Cardenas any time. "Got to be an end to this damn tunnel soon."

"All I have to do," Cardenas said softly, "is shout, and Security'll be down on you like bad news."

Again the unhealthy, relaxed laugh, a corrugated giggle. "Sure they would, but you won't shout." He held something up so Cardenas could see it.

A scrambler. Military model, banned from private use. Of course, banning was only a legal term. It didn't keep things from falling into the hands

of people who wanted to have them. When everything else failed, the police used less powerful versions of the same device to subdue juice addicts who outgrabed. It put them down fast, but it didn't do permanent damage. Fourth World military types used powered-up models for less reputable purposes. The flashlight-shaped device scrambled nerve endings. The Federale issue paralyzed. The military model could break down neurons beyond hope of surgical repair. In hand-to-hand combat it was much more efficient than knife or bayonet and a lot easier to use. You didn't have to penetrate. All you had to do was make contact.

"Go ahead and shout, if you want to." The flashman calmly touched the scrambler to Hypatia's exposed left breast.

She thrashed. Hard, but not hard enough to break the secrylic. She whined loud enough to penetrate the slightly porous gag. The flashman showed the scrambler to Cardenas again, ignoring the heavy, gasping form behind him.

"See here? No safety. A simple modification." Cardenas bit down on his lower lip hard enough to draw blood, but he kept his hands at his sides, his feet motionless. "You shout, you move funny, and I'll shove this between her legs. Maybe it won't kill her, but she won't care."

"I won't shout." Only practice enabled him to reply calmly, quietly. His fingers were bunched into fists, the nails digging into the flesh of his palms.

"That's a good little sponger."

"How long?"

Again the grin. "Since Crescent vacuumed himself. Since the investigation started." He looked ceilingward, toward the low-key incandescents. "One bulb up there's got an extra filament. Records and holds. Can't broadcast each pickup. Security would track it. Just a five-second high-speed burst when a receive-only passes outside the door. Me. Just enough range to clear the room. Not real noticeable, if you know what I mean. I walk by once a day, stop long enough to sneeze, move on. Hardly suspicious. Then playback at normal speed when I'm home. Nothing very entertaining until you showed up."

"You've been monitoring her place, too."

The flashman chuckled. "Sure now. You think I knew she'd be coming here tonight via esp? Expected you to snore on. Been getting some custom design work of your own?"

He took a step forward. The flashman lowered the scrambler slightly. Cardenas saw Hypatia's eyes widen, her body tense.

"Ah-ah. Don't want to make me nervous, Federale." Cardenas took back the step, his expression bland, screaming inside. "Glad you started pushing your hypothesis here, man. I would've been in a world of hurt if you'd started down this tunnel over at Parabas. Guess I'm just lucky."

"What do you want?"

"Don't game me. I want whatever's at the end of this tunnel. A subox, res-

onance, miracle crunch. Access. Same thing you've been after. 'Morphological resonance.' That's wild, man. Immortality? Wilder still. Relax. You'll cramp your head."

"And if you find it?"

The flashman nodded toward the side of the desk. Cardenas saw the metal and plastic plug-in lying there. He couldn't see the cable link but knew it must be there, running to jacks beneath the desk.

"One sequence. I finalize, then do a quick store-and-transfer. Anything valuable, and there ought to be plenty." He licked his lips. "Never seen a tunnel like this. Nobody has. Construction crunch alone's worth all the trouble this has taken."

"But you want more."

The flashman smiled broadly. "Man, I want it *all*!"

"You'll take it and leave?"

The man nodded. "I'm a thief. Not a vacuumer. Not unless you make me. I get what I've been after for months, and I waft." He gestured with the scrambler. Hypatia flinched. "I'll even leave you this. Memories can be so much fun."

"Assuming there's even anything in there to steal, what makes you think you can transfer a resonance?"

"Don't know unless you try, right? If you can get something in, you ought to be able to get it out. It's only crunch. Key the Box, key the transfer, and it's off to friends in the Mideast."

"Immortality for the petrochem moguls?" Cardenas's tone was thick with contempt.

"That's up to them to figure out. Not my department. I just borrow things. But they'll have the subox, if there is one. Our farseeing pinkboys are going on another trip. Suppose they can slip in and out of any Box they are introduced to? My employers could send them on lots of vacations. A little crunch out of First EEC Bank, some extra out of Soventern. With that kind of access, petrochem will seem like petty-cash stuff."

Cardenas shook his head. "You *are* crazy. Even if they're in there in any kind of accessible shape, what makes you think you can force Noschek and Crescent to do what you want?"

"Also not my job. I'm just assured it can be done, theoretically anyway. But then this is all theory we're jawing, isn't it? Unless I find something to transfer." He turned to the screen. "Starting to narrow. I think maybe we're getting near tunnel-end. Stay put." He rose, straddling Hypatia. He wasn't worried about her moving. The scrambler assured that.

The petit-point pusher in Cardenas's shirt pocket felt big as a tractor against his chest. The little gun would make a nice, neat hole in the flashman's head, but he couldn't chance it. If he missed, if he was a second too slow, the man could make spaghetti of half of Hypatia's nervous system. Thirty years teach a man patience. He restrained himself.

But he'd have to do something soon. If there was a subox holding a resonance named Crescent and Noschek, he couldn't let this bastard have it.

The flashman removed a vorec, still clutching the scrambler tight in his other hand. He was trying to watch Cardenas and the wallscreen simultaneously. Hypatia he wasn't worried about. As Cardenas looked on helplessly, the man spoke softly into the vorec. Patterns shifted on the wall. The steady thrum of the aural playback became a whispery moan, an electronic wind. The tunnel continued to narrow. They were very near the end now and whatever lay there, concealed and waiting. The flashman smiled expectantly.

Teeth began to come out of the wall.

The flashman retreated until he was leaning against the side of the desk, but it was an instinctive reaction, not a panicky one. Clearly, he knew what he was doing. Now he would use the key Cardenas had concocted following his own previous confrontation, use it to dry up the power to the psychomorph. Then he could continue on to the end of the tunnel, having bypassed the psychic trap. Cardenas watched as he spoke into the vorec.

The teeth were set in impossibly wide jaws. Above the jaws were pupilless crimson eyes.

The flashman spoke again, louder this time. A third time. The psychomorph swelled out of the wall, looming over Hypatia. She lay on her back, staring up at it. It ignored her as it concentrated on the flashman.



"No. That was the key." He turned toward the Federale, and Cardenas saw stark terror in the man's eyes. "I took it off the filament. THAT WAS THE KEY!" He screamed the words into the vorec. They were the right words, the proper inflection. Then he threw the scrambler at the opaque shape and turned to run.

The psychomorph bit off his head.

As a psychic convergence, it was the most realistic Cardenas had ever seen. The decapitated body stood swaying. Blood appeared to fountain from the severed neck. Then the corpse toppled forward onto the floor.

He stood without moving, uncertain whether to run, shout for Security, or reach for the petit point. The psychomorph turned slowly to face him. It was a thousand times more real, more solid than any convergence he'd ever seen. He thought it stared at him for a moment. Since it had no pupils, it was hard to tell. Then it whooshed back into the wall, sucked into the holodepths that had given it birth. As it vanished, the tunnel collapsed on top of it.

It was quiet in the office again. The wallscreen was full of harmless, flickering symbology. The speakers whispered of mystery and nonsense. On the floor behind the desk, the flashman lay in a pool of his own blood, the expression on his face contorted, his eyes bulged halfway out of their sockets. His ragged nails showed where he'd torn out his own throat. Cardenas searched through blood-stained pockets until he found the applicator he needed. Then he turned away, sickened.

The applicator contained debonder for the secrylic. First, he dissolved the gag, then went to work on Hypatia's wrists. She spat out tasteless chunks of the pale green putty. She was crying, brokenly but not broken. "Jesus, Angel, Jesus, God, I thought he was going to kill me!"

"He was. Would have." He ripped away sagging lumps of putty and carefully began applying debonder to her bound ankles. "After he'd finished his transferring. Nothing you or I could have said would have mattered. He couldn't leave any witnesses. He knew that." He glanced up at the innocuous wallscreen. "You saw it?"

"Saw it?" She sat up and rubbed her wrists, then her chest where the scrambler had been applied. There was a painful red welt there, but no permanent damage. She was breathing in long steady gasps. "It was right on top of me."

"What did it look like?"

"It was a psychomorph, Angel. The worst one I ever saw. The worst one anyone ever saw." She was looking past him, at the torn body of the flashman. "Talk about tactile. It really got inside him."

He finished with her ankles. "Don't try to stand yet."

"Don't worry. Jesus." She moved her legs tentatively, loosening the cramped muscles. Behind her was harmless holospace. If you put out your hand, you'd touch solid wall. Or would you? Could they be sure of anything

anymore? Could anyone?

"Another trap." Cardenas too was studying the wall. "The last trap. Why'd he kill Charliebo? He said he didn't." He found he couldn't look at the pitiful gray shape that lay crumpled alongside the desk.

Hypatia inhaled, coughed raggedly. "He didn't."

That made him look down at her. "What?"

"He was telling the truth. He didn't kill Charliebo. The tunnel did. Or the subox working up the tunnel. I don't know." She rubbed her forehead. "The psychomorph was the last trap, but there was one inserted in front of it. It — it was my fault, Angel. I thought I knew how to protect myself. I thought I was being careful, and I was. But there's never been a tunnel like that one. Part of the tunnel, before the psychomorph.

"I was worried about you, Angel. I thought maybe you were working too hard, too long. You don't see yourself, sitting there, reciting in that unbroken monotone into that damn vorec. It's like it becomes an extension of your own mouth."

"It does," he told her softly.

"So I thought I'd do some tunneling myself. Before the psychomorph there's — I don't know what you'd call it. Not a psychomorph. Subtler. Like a reciprocal program. It vacuumed the first thing it focused on." Maybe he couldn't look at the shepherd's corpse, but she could. "If Charliebo hadn't been where he was, it'd be me lying there instead of him. The tunnel, the program — it vacuumed him, Angel. Sucked him right out. It was quick. He just whimpered once and fell over on his side. The look in his eyes — I've seen that look on people who've been vacuumed. But I didn't know you could do it to an animal.

"The crunch consumption figures went stratospheric. Maybe it was the same program Crescent and Noschek used to vacuum themselves. I guess they figured that'd be one way to make sure anybody who got this close to them wouldn't bother them."

"Charliebo wasn't an animal."

"No. Sure he wasn't, Angel." It was quiet for a long time. Later: "I cut power and figured out a key to get around the trap. I thought it was the last one. That's when he came in." She indicated the flashman. "But it wasn't the last one. The psychomorph was. There were no warnings, no hints. I never would've seen it coming. Neither did he."

"Not surprising, really. I wonder if it would've made a difference if you or I had tripped it first. Because it wasn't a psychomorph."

She gaped at him.

"It wasn't a psychomorph," he said again. "It was a — let's call it a manifesting resonance. A full-field projection. I asked you if you saw it. I asked you what it looked like. You had a ventral view. I saw it face on." Now he found he was able to turn and look at the shepherd's corpse.

"It wasn't a psychomorph. It was Charliebo."

She said nothing this time, waiting for him to continue, wondering if she'd be able to follow him. She could. It wasn't that difficult to understand. Just slightly impossible. But she couldn't find the argument that would contradict him.

"Their last defense," he was saying. "If you can't lick 'em, make 'em join you. You were right when you called it a reciprocal program. Vacuum the first intruder and use him to keep out anybody thereafter. That way you don't expose yourself. Co-opt the first one clever enough to make it that far down the tunnel. It could've been you. It could've been me. They were luckier than they could've dreamed. They got Charliebo."

"Noschek and Crescent. Couple of clever boys. Too clever by half. I won't be surprised if they've learned how to manipulate their new environment. If so, they'll know their reciprocal's been triggered. Maybe they'll try to move. Somewhere more private. Maybe they can cut the tunnel. We're dealing with entirely new perceptions, new notions of what is and what isn't reality, existence. I don't think they'd take kindly to uninvited visitors, but now Charliebo's in there somewhere with them, wherever 'there' is. Maybe they'll be easier on him. I don't think he'll be perceived as much of a threat."

She chose her words slowly. "I think I understand. The first key triggered the reciprocal program and Charliebo got vacuumed. When that bastard tried to go around it —"

"He got Charliebo's resonance instead of Crescent's or Noschek's. I hope they enjoy having him around. I always did." He helped her stand on shaky legs.

"What now?"

As he held on to her, he began to wonder who was supporting whom. "I could go back to Nogales, close the file, report it officially as unsolvable. Leave Noschek and Crescent to their otherwhere privacy. Or — we could dig in and try going back."

She whistled softly. "I'm not sure I can take anymore of their surprises. What if next time they come out for us instead of Charliebo? Or if they send something else, something new they've found floating around down in the guts of otherwhere?"

"We'll go slow. Put up our own defenses." He jerked his head in the flashman's direction. "He seemed to think his people would know how to do it. Maybe with a little help from GenDyne's Box we can, too."

"Then what?"

"Then we'll see."

It took almost a month for them to learn how to recognize and thereby avoid the remaining tunnel guards. Crescent and Noschek failed to manifest themselves when the end of the tunnel was finally reached. There was a su-box there, all right, but it proved empty. The designers' resonances had gone elsewhere. There were hints, clues, but nothing they could be certain of.

Tiny tracks leading off into a vast emptiness that might not be as empty as everyone had once suspected. Suggestions of a new reality, a different otherwhere.

They didn't push. There was plenty of time, and Cardenas had no intention of crowding whatever the two men had become. It/They was dangerous.

But there was another way, clumsy at first. It would take patience to use it. What was wonderfully ironic was that in their attempt to defend themselves, to seal their passage, Crescent and Noschek had unwittingly provided those who came after a means for following.

First, it was necessary to have Hypatia jumped several grades. GenDyne balked but finally gave in. Anything to aid the investigation, to speed it along its way. What the company didn't know, couldn't imagine, was what way that investigation was taking. And Senior Designer Spango and Sergeant Cardenas weren't about to tell them. Not yet. Not until they could be sure.

Besides, the additional salary would be useful to a newly married couple. There was uncertainty on both sides at first. Gradually, hesitation gave way to recognition, then to understanding. After that, there was exchange of information, most but not all of it one-way. Once this had been established, not only GenDyne's Box was open to inspection but also that of Parabas S.A., and through the power of the Fordmatsu link, so was everything one would ever want to access. Including an entirely new state of reality that had yet to be named.

Cardenas and Spango played with it for a while, kids enjoying the biggest toy that had ever been developed. Then it was time to put aside childish things and take the plunge into that otherwhere Crescent and Noschek had discovered, where existence meant something new and exciting and a whole universe of new concepts and physical states of matter and energy danced a dance that would need careful exploration and interpretation.

But they had an advantage that could not have been planned for, one even Noschek and Crescent hadn't had.

They wouldn't be jumping in blind because they wouldn't be alone.

Hypatia had pulled her chair up next to his. It was quiet in the office. The climate conditioning whispered softly. The walls and door were security-sealed. Cardenas had checked every light bulb by hand.

In front of them, Crescent's wallscreen glowed with symbols and figures and words, with rotating holo shapes and lines. The tunnel stretched out before them, narrowing now to a point. Only it wasn't a point; it was an end, and a beginning. The jumping-off place. The ledge overlooking the abyss of promise.

They knew what they wanted, had worked it out in the previous weeks. They knew where they wanted to go and how to get there.

Cardenas took Hypatia's hand in his, squeezed tightly. Not to worry now.

Not anymore. Because they weren't doing this alone. He raised the vorec to his lips.

"Fetch," he said.



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Inflections

The Readers

Dear Mr. Price:

Please pass on my congratulations to Sheila Finch for her excellent story "Babel Interface" in your May 1988 issue. Her story had an added level of meaning for me. I worked for several years as a sign-language interpreter for the deaf. I would be truly amazed if Ms. Finch has not had some contact with sign-language interpreting, which is even more demanding than interpreting other languages. She has captured perfectly the inviolable code of neutrality and confidentiality that is necessary, but that is also a great burden to the interpreter. She has also captured the mental and emotional exhaustion that can result from trying to convey concepts for which the language has no symbols (and it is just as likely to be English that is lacking the symbols as it is sign language — possibly more likely).

I enjoyed my work and found it very exhilarating, but also very draining. It is the kind of thing that is very difficult for someone to comprehend unless he has experienced it. Ms. Finch defined the experiences and dilemmas of an interpreter with great accuracy.

Bravo!

Sincerely,
Shari Prange
70 Quail Drive
Bonny Doon CA 95060

Dear Patrick:

I liked Roland Green's essay "A World of Ideas" in the [March 1988] *Amazing Stories*. Good advice, well

put. I don't think the range of economic theory in SF is as narrow as he says, though — he's forgotten Mack Reynolds's expert treatments of alternative future structures, and L. Sprague de Camp's knowledge displayed in such a novel as *Lest Darkness Fall*, for example. But I think he's right about the potential richness of economics in SF, if we could just overcome our bias in favor of the present, obviously flawed, ways of handling the issue. The enormous complexity of present international banking only hints at the heights interplanetary commerce will attain, for example. There are innumerable stories to be crafted from the driving economic forces between, say, dry and airless Luna and the relatively wet and atmosphere-laden Mars — especially since they are "close" in the sense that the energy required to ship between them is much less than that needed to send goods to Earth.

Though few stories seem to be written about the exploitation of the solar system (and even those are often just asteroid-miner tales), it's getting richer as an area of speculation.

Sincerely,
Gregory Benford
1105 Skyline Drive
Laguna Beach CA 92651

Readers, please continue to send us your letters. We'd like to read about your likes and dislikes; this way we can better serve your needs.

*Till next issue.
— Patrick Lucien Price*

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